Rova 4, evening

I caught a flash up Ve'ra's robe as she swam away. The view was somehow more intriguing when it was covered up. Her blue skinned legs were pretty, though a little skinnier than I liked. Hell, the last week might have put me off delicate figures for a while.

I heard a series of quiet staccato pops from Filli. She kept clapping until I looked at her.

"Enjoy view?" She signed, cocking her head to show it was a question and exaggerating the motions to show it was a joke. "Many drow behind. Few ahead. Go back?"

"Drow pretty. Not good," I signed back, "Pretty good friends ahead. You meet later. I watch Ve'ra now."

I gestured at Ve'ra, knowing that Filli couldn't see her. I drifted closer once she made contact. The two mermen guarding the inner side of the gate swam up to her and started shouting at her in aquan. Sound carries pretty well through the water, but after their initial orders to halt they lowered their voices so I couldn't hear clearly.

I probably shouldn't feel surprised that Aquan is designed with speaking underwater in mind, but I somehow am. Whatever, I'm just lucky Infuse Self let Ve'ra become fluent temporarily.

My familiar held up both hands in a placating gesture, and the scaly, fish tailed guards relaxed their grip. They could still run her through in a second, but they weren't pointing the tips directly at her sternum anymore.

"Sorry boys!" Ve'ra said, "I'm just trying to pass through! If you just open up the gate and let me by, we can part as friends, right?"

They approached her and lowered their voices, making it harder to hear. I risked floating forward a few more feet, walking along the bottom of the tunnel so as to disturb less water.

"-an escaped slave." The merman on the right said, "So how will you make this worth our while?"

He leered at Ve'ra, making it obvious what his plan was.

"Irving, you're a leg man?" The one on the left asked, "I never would have guessed."

"I could be persuaded," said Irving. "You're really telling me you've never even thought about it?"

"Nah, looks like their tail got cut in half." The other guard said, "It freaks me out."

"I can be very convincing." Ve'ra said hopefully, "I won't do it with an audience, though."

“Go ahead, Irving,” the other guard said, “I’ll stay here. You owe me, though.”

“Thanks, mate.” Irving said, turning to Ve’ra , “Let’s go, then.”

He started to swim down the tunnel towards Filli and I. Ve’ra grabbed his arm and pulled herself in close.

“Can we do it outside?” Ve’ra asked breathily, “I haven’t seen sunlight in so long…”

“You’ll get through soon enough.” Irving said with a laugh. “I don’t want to risk someone hearing you screaming my name into the open sea, though.”

I rapidly signed for Filli to do her best rock impression and plastered myself against the side of the tunnel, which somehow worked. To be fair to the man, Irving thought he was getting lucky, but absolutely no one should have missed Filli just because she hunched up her shoulders and sat on the floor.

His obliviousness continued, with him abandoning his spear right around when Ve’ra started loosening her robe. She made a whole production out of taking her clothes off, and I could tell she had experience making the process enticing. Even I got distracted, so it was good that I could rely on Autopilot to steal Irving’s spear and stash it in my shadow.

Once he was thoroughly disarmed, I took a deep breath, gathered energy into my hands, and popped him in the back with a nonlethal frost blast. A line of slushy frozen sea water formed between me and my victim, resulting in an icy crust upon his body. Ve’ra grabbed his head with both hands and kissed him, swallowing up any outcry he might have raised.

You have struck Irving for 22 - 5 (cold resistance) = 17 nonlethal damage
Successful Fortitude Save, Irving is not staggered
Surprise round concluded.
Initiative rolled

Time stopped, letting me know that I’d beaten his roll for initiative. He was tougher than I hoped, able to shrug off one full powered frost blast, but I had much more where that came from. Ve’ra feigned confusion as he pushed her off of him, just in case he didn’t immediately go down, and I fired off another blast. The poor guy never stood a chance.

While Ve’ra disentangled herself from him, I turned towards the other. He went down without much more trouble, though he let out a single strangled cry.

Fair fights are for chumps.

It was possible, even likely, that I could have taken on both of them in a direct assault. They weren't elite badasses or anything, but a spear to the gut is a spear to the gut. I already hadn't expected them to need two direct shots each, and I was never entirely sure if my menu shepherded me towards level appropriate threats or not.

In any event, we didn't have much time. Ve'ra, the most mobile of us, dragged the two guards down the tunnel a short distance. I left their spears out as a possibly futile peace offering, hoping they'd prefer to forget the whole thing rather than get in trouble with their superiors.

Not likely, but they didn't exactly dazzle me with their professionalism.

The mechanism for the gate was a system of pulleys meant to be operated by two or more very fit mermen, so I was glad to have Filli along. I could turn the wheel with serious effort or by summoning my shadow puppet, but Filli didn't have any trouble at all.

Ve'ra swam back to meet with us right when we were about to leave, but her time was up. I decided not to spend one of my few precious spell slots to keep her summoned, and averted my eyes.

"Pansy." She said, just before her eyes flashed red and a stream of smoke filled bubbles poured out of her mouth.

Her temporary body, meant to last for a full hour, slumped over lifeless. I knew from experience that the "corpse" would disintegrate over the spell's remaining duration. I knew better, but it still made my blood run cold to see. For a second I saw blood seeping into the Wormwood's deck.

I shook it off and swam through the gate. I stuck my head up above the surface as I did, then ducked right back under. The pounding rain killed visibility, but I did not want to risk drawing the notice of a dragon on his morning jog, especially not when I was anywhere near the access tunnel. I went over what Autopilot knew about Dahak's Tooth.

One of the three islands ruled by the great wyrm Aashaq, high priestess of the draconic god of destruction, Dahak. A haven for the most brutal draconic species, though most leave once they grow old enough. Other than the few ports meant for trade with the outside world, humanoids are hunted for sport on and around the islands.

Why, oh why, is this where the drow decided to set up shop?

The dragons don't tend to want lairs deep underground unless they need to build a fortress. Heslandaena is unlikely to be found if we keep quiet.

I'd conjured the jellyfish mostly for this phase of the trip. By all accounts, the kinds of dragons that would willingly live in a Dahak theocracy would happily swoop down and crush a castaway like a bug. I didn't want to spend more time than necessary bobbing along near the surface. The

Enterprise would be relatively safe thanks to Tessa Fairwind's flags, but even my ship would need to stay far out to sea. Thankfully, our target liked to live away from his fellow dragons, far from the shore.

"We go that way." I signed, "Near surface. See night stars later."

Autopilot navigation, don't fail me now.

I gingerly checked my Survival skill. +6.

I mean. It's not bad. Ok. Yeah. I'm gonna need more information. Lucky me, I know exactly where to get it.

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Bered cursed under his breath as he picked up another sea urchin and plopped it in a net bag. A whole herd of them had decided his kelp bed was a great place to be, and if he didn't deal with them quick they'd cost him hundreds.

Even worse, Marina loved the things, so he was looking at his dinner for the next week. Shells packed with seaweed and urchin testicles got old very quickly, even if they were conveniently portable. Bered was tempted to try selling them, but only a surfacer would pay anything for the pests compared to what Marina would be able to get for their shells once she cleaned them.

"Hey, can I speak to you for a moment?"

Bered looked up and saw an Undine man of elven stock. The water from his gills was pretty hot, so the merman decided this was as good a time as any to stop and cool down.

"Fine, what do you need?" He said, floating up, "Mind the kelp."

The Undine pulled up his… uh… what do you call them? Oh, feet. Somehow he managed to maintain altitude without flapping them them, which was a neat trick.

"I'm traveling through the area, and I heard there were some dragons nearby." The Undine said, "Is that true?"

"Oh yeah. All over the damn place." Bered said sagely, "Mostly in the air though. Only a few proper dragons swim these waters. Where you headed?"

"East." The Undine said. "I'm headed towards the surfacer capital of Port Peril."

"Why in the depths are you going east then?" Bered asked, puffing jets of water from his gills derisively. "There's a northern current that way. Don't worry, I know a trader who works with

them. Now, if you want to get to Peril from here, you go straight south. That way, you'll meet the current when it's going east, and that'll carry you right where you want to go. No dragons, either, once you get away from the coast here."

"Good to know, but what if I did go east?" He said, his smile unchanging, "I was planning on meeting some people, so if I don't go to where we were planning on meeting up they'll worry."

"Ahhh, well, if you head out that way you'll go into Kelizar's domain. He ain't too bad for a dragon." Bered said. "He'll expect an offering, of course. You got anything valuable? Better hope your friends came with something shiny they ain't too attached to."

"What kind of offering?" The Undine asked, nervous.

"Ah, you know." Bered said vaguely, "Pearls, gold, polished coral in a pinch. Shiny stuff. He's a dragon."

The merman was a simple farmer; he and the dragons had an arrangement, they did. Bered didn't bother them, they didn't bother him. Even when he did sell to surfacers, it was to those short scaly lads, the kobolds, or occasionally to those grey elves. Everyone was nice and cozy with this arrangement, and had been for generations.

"Great, I can manage that, but I don't know if my friends can," the Undine said thoughtfully, "So, if I want to pay on their behalf, should I go straight to his lair? How do I get to it? Quickly, if possible. I'm kind of worried about my friends now."

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Rova 5

We spent the next day swimming cross country, which was the safest way for us to reach the rendezvous point. We came up for air every five or six hours, to allow the jellyfish to cycle out their oxygen. During the night I would made a small bubble of cloudless skies and let Autopilot check the stars.

Filli and I both needed rest, so once I could sense that Shishe was gone, I used some of my last first level spell slots to call up a bruiser to keep us safe. The Ekekeh looked like a dolphin, other than a line of sharp spikes on its back that crackled with electricity, and mostly acted like one too. I had to offer him 200 gold pieces to accompany us on our journey, and another 100 because I was deferring payment, but I think he was playing up his offense for a higher price.

Hopefully the crew didn't need to spend several thousand gold while I was gone.

Filli and I drifted calmly eastward, resting with the aid of Keep Watch. I doubt either of us could have actually slept in that environment. The bathysphere jellyfish towed us along at my

command, while the Ekekeh flitted around near us, settling into the headspace of an enthusiastic hiker.

The trip was blessedly boring. Most things that eat meat in the ocean preferred to live in areas with lots of meat, which we could avoid with a little bit of forethought. If we were deep enough for it to get dark, that meant less plant life. No plant life meant very little food chain to speak of, relatively speaking. Even if we had, at level 6 I was already stronger than most common creatures, and I had backup.

It's also possible that Autopilot is talking out of his ass, but it sounds logical and it's working well enough for a day trip.

We chatted occasionally while we drifted along when the crackling glow from the Ekekeh gave us enough light, though Filli tended to go silent for long stretches. After one such period of contemplation, she surprised me.

"Why help me?" Filli asked me, "I was not helpful. Ambush guards, not helpful. Talk to farmer, not helpful. Leaving city, not helpful."

"You were helpful when I needed to open the gate, and when we were crossing Heslandaena." I signed back. "Will still need help later, too, on ship."

"More than fairy?" She asked, "More than fish?"

She pointed at the Ekekeh vaguely.

"Fish is big, strong, better in water. Better before ship." She said, "Ship has strong, pretty friends, yes? On ship, not helpful. No hats, so more fairy too?"

"It isn't a competition, Filli." I said aloud in Undercommon, hopefully loud enough to carry through the water. "I helped you and your friends because I liked you and I wanted to. You're massive and strong, and I'm sure you'll kick ass as a member of my crew if that's what you want."

"Who else would take ugly ogre?" Filli signed, "No real choice."

"I mean, I know a guy who-"

"Gives new bodies. I know. Give shadow real body first." Filli signed, cutting me off, "pay debt before shadow, pay fish before debt. Other debts too, probably. Help other people. I don't need body like shadow. Still alive. Not important. Should not be important. Not worth thinking about. New body would not be strong. This one better for you."

Through the transparent jellyfish, I could just barely make out the tears forming at the corner of her eyes before it vanished into her fur.

“This is better. This is good.” She signed, staring at her own hands. “Not trapped. Not hurting. Not trapped.”

I watched, not knowing what to say.

What do I do? Pat her on the shoulder? Give her a hug? What the hell would that do? She’s not even wrong. Once she’s on my ship, she’s not a high priority. Just… useful. Strong.

“I can’t promise much,” I said quietly, “but I won’t abandon you. You’ll have my help for as long as I can give it.”

I don’t even know if she heard me. She didn’t stop talking to herself if she did.

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Dovnu sat in her husband's litter, fuming. Her most elite hobgoblin warriors accompanied her, the strongest security detail she could manage on short notice. They looked altogether out of place among the plush cushions and silken fabrics, and would be staying right where they were lest someone think Kiyon indisposed.

She stepped out at the Spinner’s Nest, dressed in nothing but a few sheer strips of fabric, a gem studded belt, and a ridiculous pair of heels, and stalked up to the reserved room for her weekly meeting. There, she reached her hand into the belt and pulled out a more comfortable outfit: a pinstriped suit from the surface and flat shoes she didn’t need to balance upon. She’d hardly finished dressing herself when she was joined by an old friend.

“Hard week?” Carys asked, voice full of faux concern.

“Oh shut up.” Dovnu said, rolling her eyes. “Are the wards up?”

Carys glanced around, her catlike eyes dilating as she analyzed the room. The Nest was a popular destination for private meetings because its proprietor layered several magical barriers to prevent spying.

“Yes.” Carys said, “Naturally there’s always a chance that they’ve cooked up something truly ingenious, but I can’t see any way someone could see or hear within this room.”

“Have your spies told you what your thrice damned son did?” Dovnu growled.

“Indeed.” Carys said, “He won.”

She placed one finger upon a certain tile on the wall and a bottle of wine was teleported to the center of the table. She poured two glasses, as normal.

“Won? Won?” Dovnu hissed, “This goes far beyond the parameters set by our contract. I don’t even know how, or why, he managed it. There’s no tactical benefit to it, I wasn’t planning on letting anyone but Nendra and her subordinates follow him in any case. Do you realize how far back this sets our plans?”

“A few months, I imagine.” Carys said, bored, “I told you, you should have simply waived the competition. It’s not as if anyone but your immediate family knows about it.”

“That would crush Nendra.” Dovnu said, “She is already healed and intends to begin the hunt the moment her obligations are in order. Maybe if he’d sat back and enjoyed himself-“

Carys snorted. Dovnu glared at her.

“You’re too used to Kiyon,” Carys said, “and why wouldn’t you be? The world would be so nice if every man were so competent and biddable. However, most men want things for themselves, and you set yourself in absolute opposition to my son. What did you expect?”

“A bit of impotent flailing, to be perfectly honest.” Dovnu said, “Maybe an escape through the tunnels if he could somehow scrape together enough coin to hire a deepstalker. It would give Nendra something to do that she’d actually take seriously. Instead, most of my top staff are idiots and my niece has gone missing.”

“Ah, yes. Speaking of Mih’Tzi, I’ll be taking her off your hands.” Carys said, sipping her wine. “She decided she would like to step away from her duties with you.”

Dovnu glared at Carys for several seconds, then cracked a smile.

“You bitch.” She said, “She’s in her right mind, isn’t she? I assumed, since she vanished…”

“Yes, the fact that she’s just fine was one of several interesting bits of intelligence she shared with me.” Carys said smugly, “I’ll explain what he did after all this blows over. It was really quite clever; I’m very proud of him.”

“Since you’re holding back, I assume that means it’s a moot point?” Dovnu said, “Nothing that will continue to harm my house?”

“Most likely not.” Carys agreed. “I’ve read the contract, and I believe it was an accident.”

“An accident.” Dovnu asked, “He seemed pretty confident the last time I spoke to him.”

“I’ll not say more on the subject.” Carys said primly, “Now, with respect to this whole fiasco, I imagine we will need to push our plans back another year? How are your sons? Are they holding up? Will they be ready?”

“Some more than others.” Dovnu said, “Not all of them have convinced their wives; that’s the real concern.”

“We can hardly expect a coup to go off without some resistance, let alone five at once.”