



>>>>>LIMINAL ARCHIVE OPENED<<<<<<

>Sermon-Hash 1008 Accepted

>Memo-Spore Hub Search: souljewel count: [00451-24-18-73-187]

>Searching...

><ERROR! QUERY FRAGMENTED>

><ANCESTROSCYTHE CORRUPTION DETECTED. PLEASE REFINE QUERY>

>Memo-spore Hub Search: souljewel count: [00451-24-18-73-*]

>Searching...

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>Multiple Threads Found

><WARNING! PROTO-NYMIC RECONSTRUCTION NECESSARY TO PROCEED>

>Continue?: Y

>Initiate Proto-Nymic Reconstruction

>Razor Protocol Line 17604...

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>DONE

>Beginning Liminal Uplink...

The first thing I felt was a slow, rhythmic lurching, as if I were being pulled through space by some reluctant and exhausted force. I opened my eyes for a moment, my head foggy, and my sight blurred. For a moment I thought the screams came from within my head. I'm not sure whether I preferred the alternative or not.

Sure enough, I was moving. The next sound that registered was the sound of some fleshy mass grinding along a crusty stone floor. After some pained thought, I realized the sound was coming from my shoulder as it was dragged along the ground. The slate-grey, pock-marked rock slid past my eyes, the rest of the world I found myself in was at a wrong angle.

Next came the pain. Everywhere. All at once. My skin felt like it had been loosed from my bones, the ragged undersides scraping at my innards, every muscle, every tendon, every joint and tissue. I gasped with a rattling wheeze. The movement stopped. A figure, rotund and silhouetted against a putrid green light, loomed over me and nudged my head with a fleshy toe. By now, my body vibrated uncontrollably, wracked with anguish. The corpulence hovering above

me said something in a language I couldn't begin to compute. It sounded like a drunken Nord slurring his speech at me from beneath a surface of roiling mucous. Flecks of spittle made contact with my face. I wasn't in a position to do much about it, however.

The *thing* put its engorged foot, resembling a green-grey mammoth's foot, on my chest and rolled me over to face what I assume to have been upwards. What rose above me, was a body, either Nordic or Cyrodilic, its feet pointed towards a dark and endless void. It was naked, cruel hooks and barbs that seemed to pull the flesh out from the poor man, like circus tents of skin, invaded his body at irregular intervals. He was bleeding profusely.

As the lumbering grey figure lifted my feet and began to drag me further, I lolled my head to see the man's face. It was submerged in a bubbling, viscous, oily liquid, down to the upper lip. His nose, eyes, and ears were beneath the surface. His bestubbed jaw quivered in place, as if to cry out in despair.

I'm unsure if I blacked out, time skipped, or my horror at what I had seen affected my mental state. The next thing I knew, I was being hoisted by an unseen, invisible force, over a similar black pool. The face looking up at me from the depths was gaunt, pale, and emaciated past the point of recognition. It was unnerving the way the pathetic creature stared fearfully into my eyes from below the still surface of the black sludge.

Simultaneously, both I and the man below me gasped in pain, as coarse hooks penetrated the skin of our collective thighs. Another gasp, this time from another hook piercing the skin between my ribs. Again and again, both my naked body and the whimpering beast beneath the muck were punctured with hooks, crooks, and clasps made of a rough, porous material. When the perforations seemed finished, I breathed a sigh of relief. But my relief was a false comfort, as little did I know, more terrors were yet before me.

Something long, gritty, and slightly curved ran down my back. It wasn't sharp, but the speed at which it was placed was uncomfortable, and scraped the skin along my spine. Some sort of green-black ropelike material was woven around my midriff, again and again, binding me to the object now pressing against my spine. Another rope, this time at my chest beneath my underarms. Or above, considering I was upside-down.

For whatever reason, the realization dawned on me, split seconds before the most horrific agony I have ever felt in my mortal existence. The man beneath me, looking with a pleading stare past sunken eye sockets and cracked, parched lips, was my reflection in the vile sludge for which I surely was destined.

The agony I felt right then originated from the barbs, now hooked into my flesh, all pulling simultaneously away from me, yanked by an unforgiving and steady invisible strength. It was in this moment that the figure waving its wobbling, fatty arms, became visible to me.

It was a creature the likes of which I had heard only tales in my youth. It was a bulbous, grey-skinned behemoth covered in a gleaming coat of oily blubber and rippling, engorged limbs. Its face was framed by a set of quivering jowls, undulating past the creature's multiple chins as its circular maw belied an aperture of gnashing, irregular teeth and the foulest stench of stale death. Its eyes were that of a shark's – blank black staring orbs, behind which sat an unfathomably calculating intelligence. Its hands were less *hands* and more like protruding suction cups with folds hinting of fingers.

As the odorous creature waved its arms and wiggled its nauseating fingers-that-weren't, the pain I felt spanning the entirety of my corporeal being transposed into sheer, unbridled terror, consternation, and panic. In my horror, I began to writhe, heaving and convulsing with my survival instinct bellowing behind my eyes and ears, demanding that I get away, whatever the cost. The struggling only increased my pain. The long object pressing against my spine

prevented the instinctual arching of my back, and the hooks seemed to eat away at my very soul.

I was lowered, headfirst, into the deceptively calm and serene liquid-like-pitch beneath me. The crown of my head was suddenly cold. Then my forehead, followed by my eyes, now veiled in the sort of black Nocturnal herself would envy. My nose filled with the freezing, viscous black pus. The stench was akin to nothing I had ever smelled. If I knew any comparison, it eluded my realization. I gagged, forcing a sharp inhale through my nose. I choked on the disgusting filth, and the expelled emulsion dribbled down my upper lip. My ears were likewise submerged, filled with the abyss-made-form, rendering the last of my senses mute. All except for the pain.

It was here that the lowering stopped. My mouth had been left above the deathly oils to ensure my ability to breathe. It seemed an eternity I stayed in this position, resigned to my misery and keenly awaiting the release of death.

>>>>>END OF THREAD 00451-24-18-73-[REDACTED]<<<<<<

>>>>>BEGINNING THREAD 00451-24-18-73-[REDACTED]<<<<<<

“N'Set disagrees with N'Grut's proposal,” the chairman droned. “It is within the best interests of the Thrassian Conglomerate to avoid the events in Summerset. As the Great One has foretold, the Machine has destroyed much already in the last several hundred years, and N'Set will not add the Sload to the growing list of casualties. This is not a new idea, small N'Grut. Even if the Sload were to attempt what N'Grut suggests, the She-Wyrms would deny our entry to the Break. The best course of action is to proceed with the contingency at the

Reven-Spire. The souls of Thras are to be better leveraged elsewhere, rather than N'Grut's foolish conjectures. Why lose what has been gained?"

N'Grut's eyes fell from N'Set, who floated above him and over a raised dais of compressed bone. He donned a bright green robe fashioned from the silks of graveworms that hung loosely past his dangling feet. Feet that likely hadn't been used in decades. The robe seemed well-fitting, albeit in the last several years the Chairman's girth demanded a fresh wardrobe at frequent intervals. His knowledge was formidable, to say the least.

Around the rolls of his otherwise nonexistent neck coiled a string of beads N'Grut had presented to him in an attempt to curry his favor. At the apex of the necklace was a golden amulet bearing the symbol of Thras. N'Grut pondered whether the necklace had been worn out of spite.

"Perhaps Chairman misunderstands the gravity of the opportunity afforded to the Sload," N'Grut protested. "One merely suggests that the Sload attempt to pierce the Jill-veil and gain access to the souls being expended at the hands of The Septim Machine. N'Grut reminds the Chairman of the technique used by N'Gasta on the isle of Stros M'Kai—"

"N'Set is aware of N'Gasta's talent for soul snares, however, is N'Gasta among us, the Chair reminds N'Grut?"

N'Grut paused and averted his eyes.

"N'Grut concedes this fact to the Chair," he grumbled. The small crowd of Sload hovering around the perimeter of the room in the dark shuffled in uncomfortable silence. N'Set tilted forward in his levitation.

"Does one detect indignation in the composure of N'Grut?"

N'Grut twisted his head around to glance at the other councilors. He turned back to look at N'Set. Their eyes locked for a moment or two. N'Grut paused, and offered a slight bow.

“One is humbled, and offers rectification of N'Grut's sentiment.”

N'Set inhaled deeply and leaned back in midair, seemingly satisfied with N'Grut's submission.

“N'Grut must present adequate argumentation for the Chairman's decision to be wavered, and The Biggest has already set its wishes. What N'Grut suggests is folly and false. The time for opportunism is long past. N'Set of the Line of Most Purulent Yshaneel, Archpannus of Agonio, Chairman of the Council of the Thrassian Conglomerate, concludes this discussion.”

The other occupants of the room levitated single-file out through the doorway behind N'Grut. He hung behind, contemplating his new direction. N'Set swept past N'Grut without a second glance. After a few minutes of reflective silence, he followed suit, rising to hover above the chamber floor and quietly retreating into the dimly-lit hallway beyond. An opening to the outside gave way to a view of the rest of Agonio, the largest island in the Thrassian Archipelago. Its nooks and crannies, hills and valleys resembled the imperfections of pockmarked skin, traits that almost seemed to hint at life within the landmass.

At its center loomed the Coral Tower, a structure older than the island, itself. The Tower was a swirling mass of pink, red, and white porous coral, with a lattice of holes and chambers open to the exterior. Lights of the purest green danced in and out of the holes in the structure, giving it an appearance of active life. Ironic, given its purpose. At the top of the Tower sat a pinnacle of stone, an overturned pyramid of earth tapering down to a point beneath a plateau of flat, solid rock. Perched on this stone shelf was yet another structure, this one crafted of crumbling and dilapidated brick and mortar – the kind seen in Cyrod architecture. As N'Grut could recall, the Reven-Spire was once used by the old Emperors of Tamriel. The name “Reman” was thrown around quite frequently. This otherworldly chunk of earth floated lazily above the Coral Tower, never quite making contact with the Tower's peak.

Milling about its midsection was a swarm of what appeared, at this distance, to be sluggish bloated flies, but N'Grut knew them to be the massive inflated corpses of deep-sea whales, repurposed using Thrassian necromancy to be used as modes of mass transit. The gasbags wandered to and from the tower, to all sections of the island, and in some cases to the other islands of the Archipelago, leaving trails of fine flakes of white mottled skin in their wake.

N'Grut drifted down a pathway overlooking the chief birthing pools of the Sload. He espied the writhing, active surfaces of the sickly-sweet-smelling waters, and could hear the sloshing as he drew nearer. He floated to a halt and regarded the pool beneath him. These larvae in particular were the collective spawn of N'Set and the other councilors, N'Grut seemed to recall. He cocked his head and ran a pudgy hand-cup down his jowls. With a flick of his wrist, a larva resembling something between a tadpole and a leech erupted from beneath the surface, and hung dazed in the open air, its bulging eyes darting to and fro in panic. N'Grut waved again, and the worm bobbed slowly to his outstretched cusp. He gripped it, examined it for a minute, and thrust it into his mouth, devouring it whole.

Without so much as a word, N'Grut continued his slow journey home, hoping that he had weakened N'Set's lineage, despite the odds that he knew were stacked against him. Every pool such as that one contained thousands of larvae, and the odds of having eaten an offspring that mattered was slim.

N'Grut's chamber was a modest one. A single room carved from a jutting rock face, a pocked hollow covered by a gelatinous prolapsed membrane serving as a door. This had been his dwelling since he had grown his land-limbs, all those centuries ago. After passing through the viscous portal, he drifted, midair, to a seat he had fashioned from a combination of his own mucous secretions, mud, and the occasional Sloadling he had brought home for this very

purpose. Being without bones at the larval stage, their beaten paste made an excellent adhesive.

He settled himself in the seat, made a gesture toward the table on the other end of the room, and a book rose from the furthest corner and drifted towards N'Grut. He snatched it from midair, laying it open upon his sizable underbelly. The book was written in such a way that at first glance, not even N'Grut could make sense of it. Of course, this was the point. He reached into a fold of his black robe and retrieved a piece of scaly tanned leather. Upon it was a single word in Thrassian – “pordauw,” which roughly translated to “portcullis,” or “door” in the Cyrodilic his most recent batch of slave-soul-donors seemed to have spoken.

With a slight flourish, the book's pages turned, finding the nearest virgin leaf. Wriggling his hand-cup, writing began to appear upon the open page, as N'Grut catalogued his failure in the Council. He continued his writing, proposing an alternate means of achieving his goals.

“The Septim Machine continues to waste souls in its conquest of Summerset. N'Grut is concerned that the Thrassian Conglomerate is allowing precious creatia to go to waste. This one nears with frustration at the council's unwillingness to run the gamut on the soul trade. In sheer volume, Ruddy Bal would have no choice but to curry our – nay, *N'Grut's* favor. The market belongs to the sellers, after all, and should Bal be unwilling to accept new playthings by this one's terms, then perhaps the Horned Child is a worthy alternative?”

N'Grut's writing paused.

“Perhaps one needs to take matters into one's own hands. What is it those primitives in the Illiac Bay say? ‘Fortune favors the bold?’ This one will put that to the test. The reward far outweighs the consequences. But first N'Grut needs a worthy vessel...”

The remainder of the evening was spent plotting. Steal a ship from the shipyard and pilot to the Summerset Isles? Or pay a helmsman for his participation and subsequent silence?

N'Grut decided that the former likely posed less risk, and so tasked himself with deciding on a ship from the great Port of Agonio to commandeer. However, this posed another problem – N'Grut required someone familiar with the seas around Tamriel, but not one who could use N'Grut's plan against him. Any Sload could easily turn him in to the Conglomerate and reap rewards from N'Set and his subordinates.

It was then that the thought struck him.

“The soulcattle.” He whispered to himself.

N'Grut, without delay, lifted himself from his seat, set his book down upon the table, and floated out the membrane door in the direction of the soulfields.

>>>>>END OF THREAD 00451-24-18-73-[REDACTED]<<<<<<

>>>>>BEGINNING THREAD 00451-24-18-73-[REDACTED]<<<<<<

By now my consciousness seemed to drift uneasily between wakefulness and a delirium that put skooma addiction to shame. Or perhaps I dreamed all of this, pressed between my nearly-submerged head, my parched tongue, and the dozens of gaping wounds held open by crude hooks, suspending me upside-down. My head pounded with the cacophony of my beating heart, insolent in how it boldly marched on despite my desire for rest.

For lifetimes, it seemed, I had remained in this pitiable position, my stomach empty, my wounds undoubtedly festering, my loins soiled and left unclean. I had been left to wither with fell magicks to stave off the welcoming embrace of the abyss. Oh, what I would have given for a thrust to the heart, or a new opening of my throat, despite that I had nothing to offer in the exchange. My mind began to play tricks on me, in my terrible throes of delusion. My body tried to convince me that I was prodded and poked, and then the hooks went numb one by one, as if

they had disappeared of their own accord. But I knew better. I was not destined for relief, of this much I was certain.

I felt suddenly as if I were being lifted, that my head was rising from the sludge in its overturned state. I could hear myself cough. I wanted to badly to believe it was a true sensation, but my eternities of tumultuous captivity gave me leave to dismiss such hopes. A trick of the mind. A trick of the mind. It's not real. It's a trick of my mind, I told myself. I trembled, expecting some new pain.

But the new pain never came. I felt the grime slough from my face, my lungs raked from the coughing that wasn't real. I refused to attempt to open my eyes again, for fear of the stinging waste entering my eyelids as it had done before. My mind couldn't trick me. Not this time. I was learned, now. I felt the bony brace removed from my back, the digging black ropes unbinding themselves from my sunken flesh. The glimmer of hope was tempting, but I held steadfast in what I knew was reality. And this, this shining moment of alleged good fortune, of relief from my pitiless tortured existence, if this was, indeed, real, perhaps my final rest lay in the immediate future; a quick jerk of the neck or a sharp blow to the base of the spine. I welcomed such ends with open arms.

I was now lying on my back, it seemed, my clammy sweat-soaked shoulders in stark contrast to the indifferent hardness of the stone floor. By now the draw of optimism was nigh unbearable, gnawing at me, and it made me doubt my sanity – what if I'm wrong? I wasn't sure that my psyche could bear being wrong again, when release is this time so salient, so vivid, and so seemingly lucid.

There was a presence hovering above me. I hesitated to open my eyes, but did so anyway, risking sure madness. I was indeed facing upward, but the grime left a painful, blurry film on the surface of my eyes. I blinked repeatedly, lifting my emaciated hands to clear my face

of the filth. When at last my vision sharpened, the figure towering over me sent pangs of horror that left me frozen. It was another of *them*. A corpulent, wrinkled, engorged slug-like parody of life, donning a black robe and coiling the rope that had fastened the bone splint to my back. Its eyes glimmered menacingly, its maw dribbling with viscous drool.

And then it spoke to me.

Not in the same fashion as the one all those millennia ago, when I had been placed in this Divines-forsaken prison, but as one might expect Man or Mer to speak.

“Lie flat, and don’t move,” it grumbled in a Cyrodiilic dialect reminiscent of the Imperial City. “One will be making use of you.”

>>>>>END OF THREAD 00451-24-18-73-[REDACTED]<<<<<<

>>>>>BEGINNING THREAD 00451-24-18-73-[REDACTED]<<<<<<

When N’Grut spoke in his best Cyro-Nordic, the man, pale, gaunt, and dripping in the larval protofluid, stared in what N’Grut assumed was horror. Many of these Tamrielic races were alien in the use their emotional responses, and he didn’t quite know how to gauge them. N’Grut began wiggling his arms in arcane gestures, incanting a Thraasian cloaking spell, the effects of which draped over the man like an unseen veil, and obscured him from view, and, while he was at it, smell. With a flick of his hand-cup, both N’Grut and the unseen cattle rose into the air and floated towards the gatehouse, beyond which the streets of Agonio lay.

Taking care not to move too unusually, N’Grut led them towards his hovel near the birthing ponds. The two rounded a corner and N’Grut nearly slammed headfirst into none other than Chairman N’Set himself, leading a tail of four or five other Conglomerate councilors, who N’Grut recognized as regular denizens of N’Set’s rectal cavity.

“What’s the hurry, N’Grut?” N’Set asked, making no movement to remove himself from N’Grut’s path.

N’Grut inclined his head in a quasi-respectful bow. “One simply wishes to return to his home. N’Grut has experiments to conduct.”

N’Grut heard a disembodied whimper from his right flank. The invisible man was evidently unaware of the gravity of the situation. Or at least hadn’t the will to keep his asinine fearful urges at bay. N’Set cocked his head to the side in confusion, eyeing N’Grut from head to floating toe.

“One senses something amiss,” one of the other councilors grumbled. He leaned into N’Set, and said, “G’Kраста believes perhaps N’Grut is hiding something.”

N’Set paused, looking over the black-robed Sload before him. “One is inclined to agree.”

The Chairman pressed closer to N’Grut with a snarl dancing about his jowls.

“Your chairman understands that sometimes the push of emotional response is a difficult burden to bear,” he mumbled menacingly. “But this one thinks N’Grut may benefit by putting a modicum more effort into the endeavor, before some begin to question N’Grut’s resolve to the ways of Thras.”

N’Grut, dropping the façade of courtesy and simultaneously masking his true intentions, glared into N’Set’s beady eyes.

“This one’s emotions are under control. N’Grut suggests that it is not he with whom the fault of expression lies.”

N’Set hovered frozen for a second or two, then pulled back as if having suddenly smelled some offensive scent, scoffed, and continued his own journey down the pathway, anal-dwellers falling in behind like ducklings. N’Grut waited for them to get out of earshot, before whispering to the hidden Cyrod, “If it brings this one under that sort of scrutiny again, one would

be pleased to flay it alive and feast upon its flesh dipped in Daedric fire.” He was met with silence.

Finally reaching the membranous entry to N’Grut’s home, he checked over his sloped shoulder that he was not observed. Satisfied, he released the spell placed upon the cattle, revealing his hideous, bone-thin, filthy, naked body to the eye. N’Grut grabbed him by the upper arm and thrust him through the entryway before following, himself. The gaunt man stood, hunched and trembling, in the center of N’Grut’s chamber, eyes darting this way and that. N’Grut peered out the membrane in reassurance that none saw the human, then waved his cusp over the surface, rendering it dark and opaque, better to avert curious eyes.

“What should one call it?” N’Grut asked, still facing the doorway.

The Cyrod took some time to muster up a response. “It?”

“Yes, its name. What is it?”

“M-my name is V-Vaesilus Metus,” he stammered.

“Too complicated. Will shorten to Vae. Agreed?”

“I don—I... A-agreed.”

N’Grut settled himself into his makeshift seat and regarded Vae for a few seconds before speaking again.

“Does Vae know where it is?” He asked.

Vae took another timid look at his surroundings. “A-all I can figure is Nirn.”

“Then one shall derive ‘negative’ from its response,” N’Grut waved, summoning his journal once again from the table. “Vae is on Thras. Is this name familiar to it?”

If it had been possible for the already pale man to go paler, it would have been proven at the mention of the home of the Sload. Vae’s eyes widened, his mouth opening and closing as if speaking in some silent, unintelligible tongue.

“You’re... you’re a *Sload*?” He asked, finally.

“Affirmative. And Vae is a Cyrodill?”

Vae nodded hesitantly. N’Grut’s book opened upon his swollen belly. He glanced at his scrap of leather from within the folds of his robe, made a small motion, and writing began appearing on the open page.

“Good. Tell N’Grut, what experience does Vae have with the sea and with nautical navigation?”

Vae scowled, scratching the back of his head with wiry, spidery hands, in stark contrast to the round, pudgy softness of N’Grut’s hand-suckers. It almost looked to N’Grut as if he were trying to remember.

“I spent some time working aboard an East Empire Company vessel, the *Redhand Swan*. But I don’t understa-“

“That’s all one needs to know. Can it navigate N’Grut to the Summerset Isles?”

“I suppose I could, if I-“

“Splendid. Upon nightfall, one will provide an adequate cloak, and one and Vae shall commandeer a vessel from the Port of Agonio.”

There was a long pause. Vae seemed confused. He treaded slowly, deliberately, to the far end of the room and curled into the fetal position on the floor, shivering from the cold. Vae didn’t mind. It was leagues better than his former mode of residency. N’Grut continued to write in his book.

“What was that place you brought me from?” he asked, piercing the silence. N’Grut cast Vae a sidelong glance.

“Those were the soulfields.” He said simply.

“A-am I supposed to know what that means?”

“It makes no difference to this one if it knows or it knows not. Suffice it to say that Vae is extremely fortunate. It is seldom that one of the cattle escapes culling.”

“Cattle?”

“If it does not cease its insipid inquiries, one will put it back and find another cattle less verbose and more obedient.” N’Grut huffed impatiently, and returned to his writing.

“What could the Sload possibly need my *soul* for? I’m no one...” Vae asked, ignoring N’Grut’s threat.

N’Grut closed his book with a snap, and stared intently at Vae.

“What is taught to larvae in Tamriel of the Sload, hm? Nothing?”

Vae only stared back blankly.

“Souls are the divine currency, and those of Thras, the merchants. Soulcattle such as Vae are destined to be drained of essence and offered up to the Daedra. A fate from which there is no return.” N’Grut leaned back in his seat. “Is N’Grut’s response satisfactory?”

Vae nodded, and uttered not another word before the darkness came.

>>>>>END OF THREAD 00451-24-18-73-[REDACTED]<<<<<<

>>>>>BEGINNING THREAD 00451-24-18-73-[REDACTED]<<<<<<

I had been lying there for what seemed like moments. Suddenly it was dark and N’Grut was pushing on me with his foot.

“It is time,” he muttered through the folds of his face.

I slowly, painfully, brought myself to my feet. My joints were stiff from maltreatment, my limbs weak and heavy. The wounds canvassing my body wept, leaving periodic red splotches on the dirt floor where I had curled. My Sload host tossed me a simple black robe, nearly

identical to the one he donned. I threw it over my shoulders, grimacing at the rough cloth stinging my open sores. My stomach growled loudly and I became increasingly aware that I likely hadn't had food or drink in what felt like decades. My stomach felt an anchorless pit, nearly ready to consume me entirely.

"Do you have any food? Water?"

"This one has food, but not for Vae."

I hesitated. "I need to eat or I'll die before we make it to your stolen ship."

N'Grut let out a shuddering sigh. He waddled with great effort to some sort of ugly wooden pantry. He slid open the panel on the front and pulled out a bowl of some kind of green-grey goo. He set it on the table with a clatter.

"Then eat."

I approached the table and examined the contents of the bowl. It almost looked like a jellyfish washed up on the shore, then had been collected with other dead jellyfish. It smelled terrible, like rotten meat, old fish, and salt. In the center was a lump of a milky white material, like fresh hailstones. It looked absolutely horrid. And yet I couldn't stop myself. I shoveled huge handfuls of the disgusting slop into my mouth, swallowed the lump nearly whole, and it was the best meal I had ever had. When I had finished licking the bowl clean, only then did it occur to me to ask what I had eaten.

"Soap."

"Soap?"

"Soap."

N'Grut placed his hand-cups on top of his belly, apparently weighing whether to elaborate.

“Sload soap is an ingredient they of Thras use in necromantic rituals. It will keep Vae alive. Or at the very least responsive.”

I wanted very much to regurgitate what I had unquestioningly consumed, but the feeling of a less-empty stomach was a blessing I couldn't bear to part with. My survival instinct was going to kill me, without a doubt.

‘And water?’ I squeaked meekly.

“There is a pool without. Vae may drink from there.”

When N'Grut decided he was ready, he cast a spell upon me, which tingled on my skin and seemed to press in on me from all sides with light pressure. I looked at my hand. It wasn't there. The Sload made another gesture, allowing his pudgy feet to leave the ground and dangle uselessly beneath him while he hovered. I felt my feet rise, as well, much to my surprise.

“Why do I need to fly?” I asked.

“Sload don't like to walk. The sounds of footsteps will draw suspicion one would otherwise prefer to avoid.”

Without another word, we floated through the mucous door, stopping across the way at a tiered steppe-pool. It was murky, and smelled of sulfur and the unsurprisingly familiar rotten fish scent that I had come to expect from this place.

“Drink quickly,” N'Grut whispered past his wobbling cheeks. “Time is of the essence.”

I crouched down in midair, dipping my hands into the cool water, bringing a mote of dripping liquid, appearing to be suspended in midair, to my face. It tasted like Imperial City sewage. But I didn't care. I went for a second draught, but was interrupted by N'Grut. His fatty arm plunged into the water and returned clutching some kind of slimy worm. I stared frozen as he forced it in its entirety into the hole between his hanging cheeks. I glanced at the water, then

back at the Sload and decided perhaps drinking this water wasn't the most capital of ideas. N'Grut seemed unaware of my reaction.

Once I had righted myself and my companion had finished his grotesque meal, we set off in the darkness, our path lit by the tower looming above us like a suspicious bird of prey searching for its next meal. I couldn't help but admire the green motes of light dancing between the otherwise invisible holes in the structure. They were quite pretty, in stark contrast to the rest of this hideous island and its "people."

After a time of floating noiselessly down a pristine path, unworn by lack of foot traffic, I could hear the sounds of the waves crashing upon a craggy shore, and I could taste the salt and brine in the air. A whirlwind of nostalgia came with it as I found myself remembering my time in the service of the East Empire Company, a simple deckhand, under the supervision of Captain Irban "Blackbay" At-Kasim.

But my circumstances were much changed, now. I found my thoughts turning to consider my would-be savior-turned-captor. I pondered what little I knew of the Sload from the stories I had heard as a child. As I grew older, I dismissed them as tales to frighten small children, to scare them into proper behavior. I see now that there was no embellishment. I doubted he would let me live once my purpose had been fulfilled.

It was then the realization came to me—if I were somehow able to dispatch of N'Grut and divert our stolen vessel to the Empire, I could be home and forget this horrid place. I could venture home and return to the merchant square in Anvil, return to the folds of my own bed. I had no family, but the view of friendly faces was missed all the same. The thing I lacked was opportunity. In my currently emaciated state, I couldn't hope to so much as reach at the Sload

without meeting my ghastly, magical end. For now, our goals were aligned, so I suppose my only course of action was to wait.

N'Grut led me past domed structures, almost organic in appearance, like bubbles submerged in the ground, different facets and pustules glinting at me in the dim green light. We passed marshy foul-smelling stagnant pools and buildings made out of dead-white coral. I saw movement inside one or two, and could hear slurred, grumbling, bubbly speech I couldn't begin to comprehend. We also passed what appeared a parcel of farmland, stalks of corn and barley substituted for inflated corpses and gangly, thorny vines. Finally, we reached a hazardously steep hillock sloping down to a rocky weed-strewn beach. Sitting in the dark ocean waters were docks made of, unsurprisingly, coral. The top surfaces looked painful to walk upon, but this would prove to be no issue when one was levitating.

Situated around the coral were ships, boats, and dinghies of varying size. Some of them appeared to be Tamrielic in origin, perhaps commandeered by seafaring Sload. I noticed a number of Imperial vessels, in particular. Unsurprising, considering the breadth of the Empire's naval corps. The masts of the motley collection of boats rose through the night air like spears, shuffling with the movement of the water upon which they sat.

Squatting at the end of a ramp leading up to the coral causeway was another of the Sload. It was naked, its blubbery skin and round frame dully reflecting the light of Masser and Secunda. It turned his head to regard N'Grut, who made no gesture of greeting.

>>>>>END OF THREAD 00451-24-18-73-[REDACTED]<<<<<<

>>>>>BEGINNING THREAD 00451-24-18-73-[REDACTED]<<<<<<

“Remain quiet,” N’Grut hissed back in Vae’s general direction before returning his attention to the guardsman. “Greetings, comrade. May this one pass?” he said, returning to the Thrassian tongue.

The other Sload cocked his head, beady eyes darting up and down, drinking in every detail of N’Grut’s appearance.

“Why?” It asked.

“One wishes to inspect one’s skiff. Is this problematic?”

The guardsman nodded. “The Conglomerate has tasked F’Loggar with denying entry to all who might seek passage to the yard.”

N’Grut hesitated for a second, then reached inside his robe, producing his scrap of leather. He motioned to hand it to the guardsman.

“One has special arrangement with the Conglomerate. N’Grut endeavors to inspect with haste.”

Behind his protruding belly, N’Grut’s other cusp made arcane motions in anticipation. The guardsman stood erect (with some huffing and puffing, to boot) and reached out to take the scrap, but was met instead with N’Grut’s prepared spell. He outstretched his other hand-cup, sending waves of yellow-green light into the guardsman’s face. His skin bubbled and burst, sloughing from his head and piling upon his engorged abdomen, revealing the muscle and bone beneath the flesh. When N’Grut pulled his hand-cup away, the guardsman fell backwards into a faceless heap of dead fat, the blubber around its head scorched and bubbling. The smell was beyond words.

“Now the Yard is now open.” N’Grut said in Cyrodilic.

He floated over the corpse impeding his path and continued to the farthest outcropping of dock-coral, where one of the Imperial cogs idled. He decided the point of secrecy was now moot, and dropped the spell he had woven over Vae. N'Grut stopped before coming to the gangplank of the ship, and, without looking at Vae, asked, "Does Vae know how to pilot this ship?"

He gave it a once-over, then glanced over his shoulder at the dead Sload in the distance. "Y-yes, I... I think so."

"Vae *thinks so*? Or Vae *can*?"

"I can," Vae paused. "But it will be difficult with just the two of us."

"Explain."

"W-well there are probably enough necessary tasks on a ship like this for at minimum a half dozen..." Vae tightened the robe around his shoulders, shuddering more out of exhaustion and nerve than out of cold.

"Vae will simply take post as navigator. This one will take care of the rest. Perhaps if fortunes permit, the former owners of this vessel were never removed."

"Never removed?" Vae scowled, confused.

"Affirmative," N'Grut gestured to the rest of the port. "Many of these were taken, and in most cases, what good is it to dispose of the deceased when they are perfectly capable deckhands in their own right? Come, others will be along shortly."

Vae shuddered, hoping against hope that this vessel wasn't occupied by the dead. Once they had ascended the gangplank, Vae timidly explored the upper deck while N'Grut ventured below. Vae heard the distinct sounds of incantation followed by baleful moans and shuffling. Rooted to the spot in horror and disgust, N'Grut returned to the upper deck with a cadre of eight shambling corpses, each in a varying state of decomposition. Their skin was shriveled, and in

many places gone altogether. Possessing eyeless, blank faces and skin black from putrefaction, they appeared to be following N'Grut's commands. From the look of their clothing, they were mostly Cyrod, but Vae thought one of them might be an Argonian, or perhaps a Khajiit. The face was rotted away, leaving nothing but mottled flesh, sinew, and bone, and the tail was similarly deteriorated.

"Give them orders," N'Grut barked. "and set sail for Summerset."

Vae did as he was told, albeit hesitant to address animated bodies. He assigned one to the helm, one as watch (for all the good it would do), and two to climb the rigging and prepare the sails for departure. The rest were put below deck to row the cog out of the port. It was unnerving to Vae how the undead performed their work without so much as a sound. In a usual circumstance, a crew would be loud, singing shanties, swearing at one another, or shouting orders. But this skeleton crew brought an all-too appropriate meaning to "silent as the grave."

As the cog retreated from the dockyard, Vae took his position near the prow of the ship and peered into the night sky in an attempt to gather his bearings. It took him some time, but eventually he spotted the Steed, sitting at a strange angle in the dark canvas of night, and determined his heading. Vae knew that Thras sat to the far west of Tamriel, but knew not its position north or south. So he directed the ship east and prayed to Kynareth and Arkay for his safe passage across the long and endless sea.

>>>>>END OF THREAD 00451-24-18-73-[REDACTED]<<<<<<

>>>>>BEGINNING THREAD 00451-24-18-73-[REDACTED]<<<<<<

Over the next several days of sailing, I was forced to angle off the side of the ship for food, occasionally making use of nets and the mast to ensnare gulls. I did my best not to

engage with N'Grut, but he periodically would come above deck, weave some new spell, and watch as the shambling corpses abruptly refreshed themselves, working with renewed vigor. Or at least as much vigor with which a dead person can hope. The zombies many a time wandered over to me, as if asking for duties to perform. Their sudden, jerking, inhuman movements almost unnerved me as much as the fact that they were at one point living. N'Grut had placed most of their direction under my responsibility.

I was reminded of my last voyage as a hand on the *Redhand Swan*. Prior to arriving in Thras, I had only seen a dead body once, and that had been the waterlogged cadaver of a Dunmer, assumed to have been lost at sea. Captain At-Kasim bade me pull it aboard. I didn't want to. Was almost flogged for impertinence. When the elf was pulled on deck, the visage, contorted and misshapen by decay, stared unforgivingly at me. As if it blamed me. Its prolapsed eyes, one of which had been picked at by some sea bird, had met mine, and in my mind, the eye contact never ceased. When the *Redhand Swan* again made port, I left the ship, bought out my contract with the East Empire Company, and devoted myself to a life on *nirni firma*. I opened a meager shop, and vowed I'd never use my sealegs again, lest I be haunted by the Drowned Mer.

Only once had I broken this vow, boarding a vessel for leisure. Five hundred drakes for a lovely maritime banquet and a tour of the Abecean. Or so I had been told. Some time off of Stirk, our vessel ran afoul of a sudden oceanic storm, the result of which I can't remember, save for being placed in the soulfields at the hands of the vile and disgusting Sload.

Partway through our voyage, we had gotten closer to familiar stars. I found myself recognizing more of the Firmament, angles a tad closer to what I had studied as a boy. At one point I had leaned out over the starboard side to see if our modest ship bore a name. *The Bosom of Kynareth*, I found it to be called. I heard a squawk and frantic fluttering. In the net was

an albatross. My stomach had no pity for the bird, yet it seemed only right to cut it free. I climbed the rigging, gripping a rusty, foul-tasting dagger in my teeth, and managed my way to where the albatross was tangled, wings spread at odd, surely painful angles. It squawked some more as I approached, its struggling becoming more frantic and panicked.

Steadying myself by wrapping my legs around the ropes, I took care to keep hold of the rigging with my left hand while pulling the foul-tasting steel from my mouth with the other. Reaching out with the blade to attempt to cut it free, I discovered that the bird was barely out of arm's reach, so I adjusted and shimmied closer. With my tongue hanging loosely from the corner of my mouth in concentration, I reached once more for the panicking albatross.

I nearly lost my grip when the bird burst into flames. Green flames. I blinked, horrorstruck, following the trail of ashes floating toward the deck. Beneath me hovered N'Grut. He loomed over the bird (or rather what remained of it), looking down at it, and then at me, chins forming odd shapes in between the two.

"Get back to work." He said, turning his back and retreating below deck.

Several minutes passed before I moved. It occurred to me that I was a prisoner under the open sky. Ironic, really. All the open space in the world, and I was confined to this hellhole of a ship. I found myself eyeing the peaceful waters flowing past. Everyone knows you never kill an albatross.

>>>>>END OF THREAD 00451-24-18-73-[REDACTED]<<<<<<

>>>>>BEGINNING THREAD 00451-24-18-73-[REDACTED]<<<<<<

N'Grut sidled into the cushion he had constructed from bedding found in the cabin. The cabin itself had likely once been finely furnished. Moldy tapestries hung on the walls, some lying in

piles on the floor beneath their previous home. A Betony-style double-door led to a balcony at the stern, raw, scuffed, cracked wood forming a railing. Red and gold chips of paint peeled away, hinting at a former life of splendor.

There were several pieces of furniture inside the cabin. An overturned bed with a rotting mattress, now appropriated, a chest of drawers with damp, soil-smelling clothing folded within, and a finely carved wooden desk, now splintering in some places. On the decrepit wooden desk sat N'Grut's journal, open to a blank leaf, and beside it, the scrap of leather. N'Grut began to catalogue.

"Despite its misfortune, the Cyrod still evidently clings to hope. One has seen to it that Vae is observed through the eyes of one's latest servants, and that it has enough sustenance to dissuade drastic action. With the several deceased at one's beck and call, N'Grut shall have no difficulty restraining Vae if it becomes desperate or violent. Perhaps one can recreate a rudimentary soulfield apparatus if it becomes too unruly. Put it back where it belongs. On the subject of souls, one cannot help but postulate the odds of piercing the Jill-veil. Should the Septim Machine prove as formidable as one has heard, surely the She-Wyrms will be preoccupied with other tasks. N'Grut finds humor in the thought that others in Thras busy themselves with a spire laden with cattle and supplies. What good to go begging to the Dark Moon when it has no obligation to allow safe port? Where then to turn? Back to the Ideal Masters? Simpletons. What N'Set failed to grasp is that, if the Machine is as grand as is said, it will likely ignore a pinprick on the waves in lieu of more salient threats. A simple soul snare array adapted to wide-area Sleeve Intercepts will be beneath its cares. All the piling dead will serve their purpose to N'Grut. One way or another."

>>>>>END OF THREAD 00451-24-18-73-[REDACTED]<<<<<<

>>>>>BEGINNING THREAD 00451-24-18-73-[REDACTED]<<<<<<

It had been days, and there was little to no sign, aside from the stars, to indicate whether they were going the right way. Vae began to doubt himself, his bearings becoming more erratic and panicked.

“How long until the Isles are met?” N’Grut asked during one of his routine resurfacings. Vae hesitated.

“I... I don’t know.”

N’Grut rounded on him, his face coldly indifferent, and his voice icily menacing. “What does Vae mean ‘it doesn’t know?’ Has Vae been navigating, or hasn’t it?” The sailor-corpses began to form a small crowd around the two. Vae felt the unseeing eyes of the waterlogged cadavers. Nearly frantic, he glanced at his shipmates.

“Y-you must understand-,”

“N’Grut *must* do nothing. Speak!”

“Navigation is difficult without charts, compasses, maps...” Vae stammered, stepping back from the Sload, who towered over him in midair.

“Vae told N’Grut that it could navigate. N’Grut took this to mean that the stars alone were adequate. Are they?”

“Well... no—“ Vae was cut short by N’Grut’s spell. He placed his hand-cup on Vae’s abdomen, where the spell spread like the tendrils of some deep-sea horror, black and writhing under the skin. Vae coughed, and blood dribbled down his chin. He fell to his knees, eyes wide and clutching his stomach. N’Grut knelt down next to him and gripped the back of his neck, whipping his head around to make forceful eye contact.

“Never mislead N’Grut again,” he whispered. “One is versed in the magicks of viromancy, and with but a word, N’Grut can reduce it to a quivering pile of malignant entrails. Is there understanding?”

When he righted himself, Vae gasped and nodded. The black veins retreated, marking the end of the spell. N’Grut leaned his girthy belly on the balustrade of the starboard side. He was silent for a few moments while Vae reconstituted himself.

“Does Vae know in which *direction* the Isles lie, then?” N’Grut asked in irritation. Vae pointed to the southeast, in the vague direction of the rising moons.

“That way.”

N’Grut squinted off into the horizon for a few moments. “Very well. Get to work.” His robe arced as he turned in midair and returned to the cabin. Vae watched him go. He didn’t dare exhale until the door had closed. The undead sailors shambled back to their tasks.

Despite his exhaustion, his raw lungs, his throbbing head and the soft lilt of the ship’s hull, Vae found himself able to sleep about as easily as when he had been stuck in the soulfields – that is to say, nary a wink. His mind reeled every night from the outlandish situation in which he was constrained. Stuck aboard a ship with a baleful Sload, members of the ship’s crew smelling of decay, and always working. They never rested, and Vae couldn’t have a moment’s peace. N’Grut had taken the liberty of stationing two of the zombies next to Vae’s hammock below deck. He tried telling them to leave, yet they persisted. Silent odiferous sentinels. Vae hated them more and more as his sleeplessness grew. To Vae, this was hell.

>>>>>END OF THREAD 00451-24-18-73-[REDACTED]<<<<<<

>>>>>BEGINNING THREAD 00451-24-18-73-[REDACTED]<<<<<<

Occasionally N'Grut would cast a simple spell and enter the body of one of the undead crew, if nothing else than to observe Vae's actions. It brought him some measure of joy to bring the walking corpses within a hand's breadth of Vae, under the guise of performing nautical duties. N'Grut knew it made Vae uncomfortable, and to N'Grut, this was the pinnacle of humor, slowly peeling back Vae's sanity via fear.

The trip for N'Grut had been somewhat boring. He had spent a span of several days working out the minutia of his soul snare array, occasionally testing it on marine life. The soul gems he kept in a small pocket realm were numerous enough to handle the souls of a number of fish. N'Grut didn't take the time to count the souls, but he was confident that it made no difference. The rest of the gems would be filled in due time.

For once, N'Grut felt his goal within reach. The souls he would gather could be enough to make him among the most powerful Sload in Thras. In Nirn, even. Gods would ask for audience and heroes would tremble at his image.

Oh, how the councilors will rue their mocking...

>>>>>END OF THREAD 00451-24-18-73-[REDACTED]<<<<<<

>>>>>BEGINNING THREAD 00451-24-18-73-[REDACTED]<<<<<<

I couldn't bear it any longer. My days began to bleed together. The embrace of Arkay would be more comfortable that lasting a moment longer on this damnable ship. It wasn't long until I had devised a rough outline of a plan. I abhorred any unnecessary encounters with my shipmates, and had decided that drowning myself was my preferred method of expiration. Peaceful. Quick. And if my timing was right, I could avoid N'Grut's profane magicks and be departed long before he realized I was missing.

I made sure to pick a night when the sky was cloudy, so as to limit visibility. I left my corner of the lower deck and suffered the eyeless stares of my silent guardians. They seemed to be judging me.

“I’m going to the toilet.” I said over my shoulder to them, averting my eyes from their haunting faces.

When I emerged from below onto the main deck, I was pleased to find my forecast had been correct. The night was dark, and there would be no Masser, Secunda or starlight to harry my journey to Aetherius. The dead sailors were still hard at work, handling ropes, scrubbing the deck, and one stood at the helm, holding the *Bosom* on course. It was the same one I had designated on this gods-forsaken journey. The makeshift captain was the only true obstacle between me and my intended fate.

I ascended the short flight of stairs that rose to the side of the cabin doors and approached the poop at the starboard quarter. I dared not hesitate. Under my breath I began reciting a prayer to Arkay I had learned as a boy.

Though I walk in the penumbra of death, shield me from the darkness.

The helmsman’s rotting head followed me as I neared the railing. Feeling unseeing eyes upon the back of my neck, I began to undo my trousers, hoping to avoid suspicion.

Guide me by the hand, lead me to peaceful Shores and kind Waters.

I made a conscious effort not to peek over my shoulder, lest I give myself away. With my trousers at my ankles, I placed both hands on the railing. The wood had at one time borne the hallmarks of Imperial craftsmanship, but it was now worn and ill-kept. It was rough under my fingers.

To Arkay I entrust my soul, to see it to an eternity in Aetherius in love and warmth.

I was shaking. I didn’t want to die, but I couldn’t live like this, either.

In the name of the Nine, I am yours to reap.

Before I could start to second-guess myself, I closed my eyes and vaulted over the railing towards the rushing black waters below.

But I made no impact.

I opened my eyes. I was floating just past the rail. I whipped my head around and I felt my face drain of blood. N'Grut was holding me aloft with a spell, his pudgy face contorted in anger.

>>>>>END OF THREAD 00451-24-18-73-[REDACTED]<<<<<<

>>>>>BEGINNING THREAD 00451-24-18-73-[REDACTED]<<<<<<

“LET ME GO,” Vae screamed. “I CAN’T DO THIS ANYMORE.”

His shrill protests became pathetic sobs. Vae flailed in midair, his efforts bearing no fruit. N'Grut levitated Vae back over the deck and dropped him. He yelped in pain. N'Grut advanced upon him, trying to come up with some clever torture method that would simultaneously dissuade Vae from attempting suicide again. Vae scurried backwards in a crab walk, desperate to distance himself from the Sload. His thin malnourished form scrambled over the deck in a panic. He was stopped by a pair of waterlogged legs, their owner looming over Vae. It was the Argonian/Khajiit corpse.

“Did Vae think it could escape so easily?” N'Grut hissed. “Did Vae think one’s servants were blind? N'Grut sees all, Cyrod. And it has attempted to steal one’s prize.”

He paused, his jowls quivering, as if in a smile. He began performing the somatic component of some dread spell.

“One explained to Vae what would happen should Vae defy one again.”

“No... please, no...” Vae whimpered.

N’Grut lashed out with his spell, a scathing incantation laced with malice. Vae screamed in pain as his lower leg separated itself from his body, torn from the knee, as if it had been ripped off by a team of horses. Blood gushed from the stump at Vae’s knee, the rest of his leg lying useless, not inches away from whence it came, now pale and lifeless.

“One will see how well Vae can jump without working legs.” N’Grut spat. He turned to the sailor nearest him. “Take Vae back to its quarters. And double its guards. I’ll not allow it to foil one’s plans.”

With a flick of his wrist-cup, the bleeding stopped, but Vae screamed even more, as if a hot poker had been shoved into his wound. His moaning became muffled as the four undead lifted him with unnerving synchronization, in no way attempting to avoid touching his maimed leg or his number of superficial wounds from captivity.

For a majority of the next several days, Vae remained in his quarters, only surfacing with much effort to look at the stars and adjust the *Bosom’s* bearing. He was nearly delirious, but he had managed to cinch a loose bit of cloth he found around his knee. He had no idea how long this voyage had been. It could have been days, weeks, or even years, as far as Vae could tell. N’Grut had seemingly halted the bleeding of his leg with magick, but the wound was still open. He checked his wrappings daily, and was sure the green-yellow pus now enveloping part of his exposed kneecap was infection coming to end his misery. But something in the back of his mind suggested death wouldn’t come so easily. Surely infection is nothing to a viromancer Sload.

On what must have been the twentieth day of their voyage, Vae heard a commotion from above deck. When he had finally risen from his hammock, he was puzzled to find that his zombified guardians weren’t at their posts. Confused and still in a mental fog, he struggled to hop his way to the stairs that would bring him to the upper deck. As he slowly made his way

upwards, he heard noises the likes of which he had never heard. The sounds of echoing booms followed by absolute silence, of clanging metal and shaking earth, once again swallowed up by an imperceptible noiseless void.

When Vae's head rose over the deck, all the undead sailors were crowded along the port side, N'Grut among them. They had their backs turned to Vae, and he was forced to lift himself higher. What he witnessed out in the bay was nothing short of alien. Before them sat the isle of Alinor, the capital of the High-Elven province, its glass and crystal towers glinting in the sunlight, innumerable Altmeri ships crowding the harbor where the isle met the sea. But Alinor was not the focus of Vae's attention.

Out in the bay, perhaps a mile from the *Bosom of Kynareth*, was, for fractions of a second, flashing in and out of existence, an enormous metal man-shaped behemoth, its yellow-bronze armor crackling with obscene magicks. Flying in swarms around the creature were figures firing strange colored beams, bolts and auras from their hands, eyes, mouths, and chests. It took Vae a few seconds to catch another glimpse, as it flickered in and out of reality, changing the weather with it. In one moment the sun was shining. In another, it was dreary, windy, and cold. When the weather changed, Alinor changed with it. Instead of shining towers, there stood smoldering rubble.

Above the machine swirled a mass of flying creatures, what Vae could only guess were dragons, as outlandish as that seemed. The creature flickered once more.

“

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With a final roaring boom, the weather reverted to its bleak, cloudy state, Alinor was in ruins, and the sounds of distant battle remained. The Brass figure stood in the bay before them.

The sheer power of the machine's indiscernible voice sent scores of the dragon-things hurtling in all directions, many simply falling from the sky above the metal man's head, plucking the entire swarm from the sky. N'Grut turned his head to Vae behind him, and made a sweeping gesture towards the Giant of Brass.

"Behold," he said, eyes twinkling in the most terrible of ways. "The Septim Machine walks, and Vae's usefulness has run its course. One will be most gentle with Vae's soul." N'Grut began casting a spell, and Vae found himself unable to breathe, lifted off the deck by his throat. Through his blurred eyes, one of the winged beasts hurled towards the *Bosom*. It crashed into the hull, sending splinters, salt water, and blood in all directions. N'Grut lost his concentration and Vae crumpled to the now lopsided deck. The sea mist got in his eyes. Vae found his hand clutching some hard chunk of wood. Prying his eyes open, it was a jagged piece of what had once been the hull, one side ending in a cruel point.

N'Grut had returned his attention back to the metal giant, more concerned with the task at hand. The Cyrod could wait. It was walking towards the *Bosom*, its footsteps vibrating the ocean water ominously. It swatted away some floating spellcasters attempting to penetrate its thick armor, some creating complex magical mirrors that reflected the sunlight of a reality that wasn't.

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Another roar. N'Grut could have sworn there were mages harrying the behemoth not seconds before, but he was sure he was mistaken. N'Grut hovered above the wreckage of his commandeered vessel, staring up at the monstrous Brass God. Fearing he may lose access to

so many souls, he began weaving a wide-area soul snare array, which began to spread forth from his hand-suckers. As the Man of Brass lumbered closer, leaving ship wreckage in its wake, N'Grut craned his head and felt a new feeling. Terror. There was a sudden jerk at his neck, and his vision was obscured by a pointed wooden splinter. It was covered in blood. Sload blood. "Happy to be of service," Vae growled in his ear-hole.

“ ”

>>>>> END OF THREAD 00451-24-18-73-[REDACTED] <<<<<<

>>>>> END OF STREAM <<<<<<

EPILOGUE

"An absolute fool."

"Agreed."

"Despite N'Grut's ignorance, there is something to be noted in his persistence."

"This one is unsure his persistence ought to be the focus of this demonstration."

"Agreed."

"One does not find, however, the actions of N'Grut devoid of irony. His unchecked emotions and unbridled thirst for power led to his biggest blunder. One's memories are unclear concerning any meeting with N'Grut, yet the spores speak clearly. The Septim Machine remains on Nurch, branding the Land of the Spiteworthy with its own unraveling."

There was a pause.

"It is an odd coincidence that the search for information on Numidium led to a parable for we of Thras. 'Before the fall, there is pride,' the Biggest might say."

The eerie purple light filtered in through the dust and the rectangular doorslab lowered itself with a patient velocity.

N'Set shielded his eyes from the light after spending so long in utter darkness, packed in with his other Councilors like larvae in a hatching pool. Before them sat a vaguely familiar landscape. Rolling thunderheads of the blackest night swirled overhead, woven in a tapestry of starlight and fury. The ghostly silhouette of a spherical mass sat balanced upon the horizon, straddling the night sky like a mourner beside a grave. A solitary structure stood in the distance, seeming to pierce the moping planet in the sky. An immeasurably tall white column, pocked with crevices and holes, green lights swirling in and out of the various chambers. At its base stood a

black pyramid of obsidian, the pulsating energy of souls flitting within its volume. The air smelled acrid, yet sweet, like the rotting flesh of a waterlogged sailor strewn upon the shores of Agonio. Bobbing through the air, formless and shapeless wisps of malice hovered overhead, occasionally pausing as if to inspect the newcomers and their floating castle, unbeckoned yet present all the same.

"Coral-Thras lives once more." N'Set said over his shoulder to no one in particular. He pointed to the Coral Tower. "Prepare to disembark. The Ancient One requires a meeting." One of the other councilors stood abreast N'Set, squinting into the roiling sky. Stars peaked through the clouds at strange intervals.

"Which one is Nurch?"

N'Set mimicked the other Sload's gaze for a moment. His sight was easily drawn to one location, like an eye might wander to a spider in its web. N'Set leveled a hand-cup at a series of three blinking lights. The brightest of them gave a pale white light, flitting in and out of view. It was crowned by two smaller, dimmer winking dots, one a purer white, the other a rusty red.

"There."