

ALAN DEAN FOSTER

JOURNEYS OF THE CATECHIST • BOOK 3

A TRIUMPH OF SOULS



The Journeys of the Catechist Series:
Carnivores of Light and Darkness
Into the Thinking Kingdoms

The Dig
The I Inside

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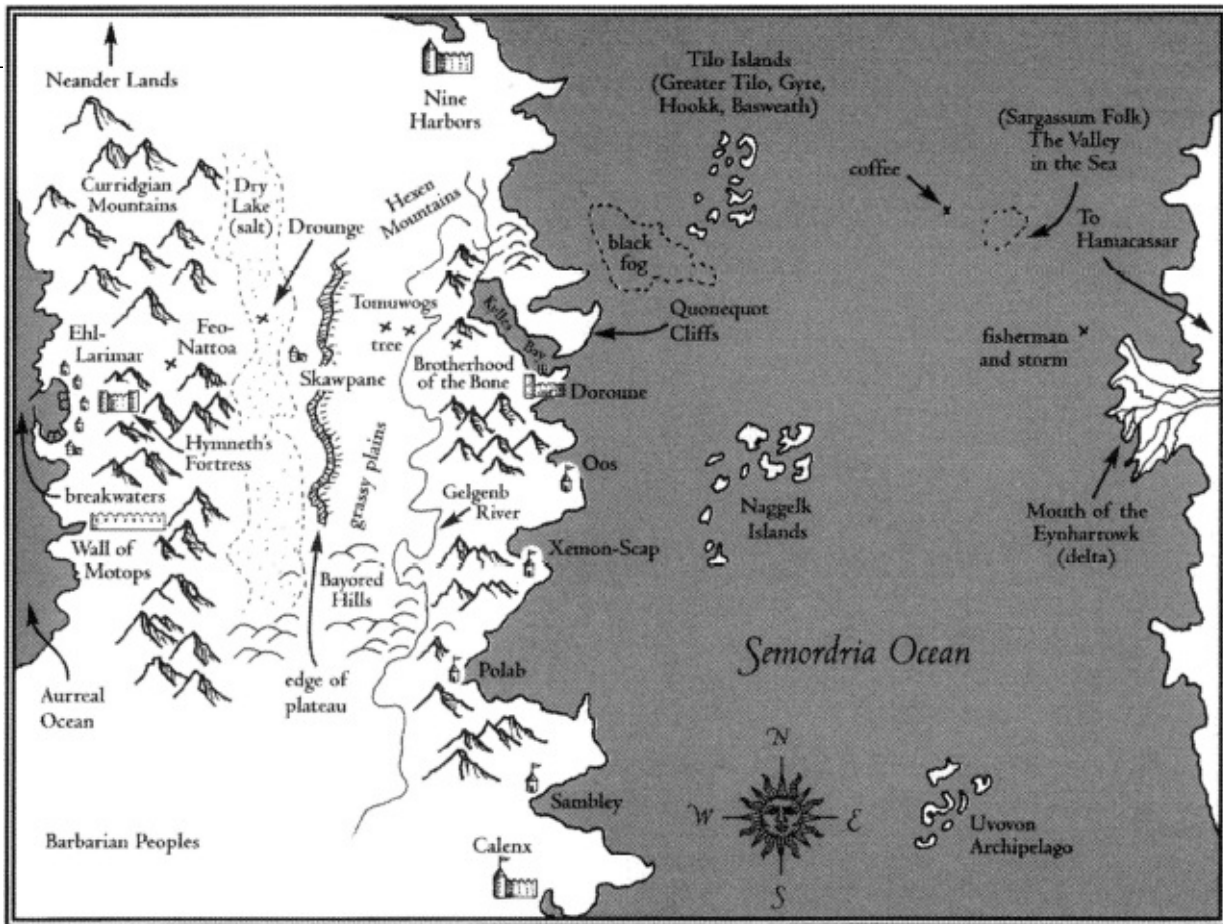
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For my nephew, Joshua Francis Carroll



I

He is coming. And he is not alone.”

So spake the Worm.

It had started out to be a better day. Waking after a passable night's rest in a less discontented mood than usual, Hymneth the Possessed had chosen to dress in armor and accoutrements that were celebratory instead of intimidating. Gold-trimmed leggings tucked tightly into high boots of dark-crimson embossed leather. Scarlet armor covered him from head to thigh, and rubies so red they were almost black studded the gloves that encased his bare hands. Instead of horns, the high-ridged crimson helmet with its rearward-sweeping feathered crest gave him the appearance of some great and noble raptor diving to Earth.

Eyeing the result in the narrow floor-to-ceiling mirror at the far end of his dressing chamber, he found that he was well pleased with the effect. Today he would inspire only awe among his servitors and subjects, and leave terror in the closet.

At his high-pitched, intricate call, the twin eromakadi ceased their hunting of small bright things beneath the massive bed and came to heel. Intricately filigreed satin cape swirling behind him, he exited the sleeping chamber in a flurry of gold and crimson and made his way downstairs.

As usual, he ate alone, attended only by silent servants desperate to be free of his company but unable to show their true feelings. Their frozen smiles and polite inquiries after his health fooled him for not a minute. Their fear was as plain to hear in their voices as if they had been bound and bleeding in his presence. The slight tremolo at the end of every sentence, the swift darting of eyes whenever they thought he was not looking, the infinitesimal quiver of lower lips: Their emotions were as blatantly obvious to him as bulging eyes and hacking sobs.

He ignored it all, pretending to be taken in by the pitiful subterfuges as they served him. These were the best of the best, the few who could survive in his service without going mad or begging for dismissal. It made no sense. Was he not a kind and even generous master? Other nobles of wealth and power regularly beat their staff. Still others paid only a pittance for services rendered. In contrast to this, he was tolerant of oversights and paid well. And, in addition, there was the prestige that went with working in the house of the master of Ehl-Larimar. He could not understand why his people were not content.

Yes, it was necessary occasionally to discipline a menial for a job overlooked or poorly done. Yes, his methods for doing so were undeniably—well, different. As in everything, he prized efficiency above all. Why it should matter to people if a miscreant was crippled or given the face of a bat or frog instead of simply being broken on the rack or blinded in the traditional manner he could not understand. Was it not better to have the teeth of a rat than none at all? Sometimes he felt he would

never understand the reasoning of the common man.

Of the gustatory delights that burdened the dining table he normally would consume only a small amount. The remainder of the pancakes, eggs, meats, breads, jams, butters, fruits, cereals, juices, and cold drinks would be divided among his kitchen staff. He grunted to himself as he ate, passing food and liquid through the lower opening in the crimson helmet. They might tremble too badly to eat in his presence, but he knew that once he was done the food would vanish rapidly into hungry mouths. Which was well enough. Let them serve him. Love he would find elsewhere.

Love he sought, actually, in only one place.

Lifting his gaze to the stairway that entered the dining chamber from the left, he tried to imagine her descending to join him. Did his best to envision the fluid succession of perfect curves and contours concealed by clinging ripples of satin and silk, the hair like ribbons of night draped across bare shoulders that put the finest ivory to shame, and the eyes that were like sapphires. Eyes that he would have given half a world to have focused on him.

He imagined her approaching, not walking but flowing like mercury across the floor, weight shifting sensuously with each step, lips of blood-red brighter than his armor parting slightly as she raised one delicate hand to place it on his shoulder and whisper in the voice that turned men's legs to jelly and set their groins ablaze, "Good morning, My Lord."

Little enough, he agonized inside, to want. Little enough. Yet even now, after all this time, the best he could hope for was that she would not curse him aloud in his presence. She would eat later, he knew. In her room, or after members of the entourage he had assigned to her had assured her he had left to attend to matters of state. He possessed no more of her presence than he did of her passion.

Suddenly the morning no longer seemed so propitious. The food curdled in his mouth. Angrily, he pushed his plate away, and the two servitors attending him twitched visibly. Neither man ran, however. They knew all too well the fate of those who had fled the presence of the Possessed without first being properly dismissed.

Leaning back in the high, sculpted chair of carmine cobalt, he rested his armored chin against one massive fist and brooded. After several minutes, the two servants exchanged a glance. The one who had lost the wordless debate took a step forward. His voice was deferential and suffered from only a slight quavering.

"Lord, if you are finished, should we clear away the dishes?"

He waved an indifferent hand. "Yes, yes, take it away. Take it all away!"

Bowing obsequiously and repeatedly, the man and his companion began to remove the masses of food and flatware. Hymneth sulked in his chair, contemplating aspects of life and death to which most living creatures were not privy, until a loud crash penetrated his pondering and brought his head around.

The second servant, a well-built and comely youth of some twenty and four years, was kneeling over the fragments of a shattered enameled tray. Muffins and sweet rolls, breads and breakfast cakes were still rolling away in several directions. From his crouch, he looked up to see the helmeted head staring down at him. The look on his face was one of sheer paralyzed terror.

"L-lord, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I—I will pay for it." Hastily, he began sweeping the larger fragments into a pile, not caring if he cut himself on the fractured ceramic.

"Pay for it? It would take six months of your wages, lackey. I wouldn't think of taking that from you. It would be cruel. In the absence of your salary I am sure you have loved ones who would go hungry. Besides, it's only a plate. In this castle there are hundreds of plates."

"Yes—yes, Lord." Some of the terror drained from the man's face. He swept faster, trying to

gather up every last shard and white splinter.

“However,” Hymneth continued, “~~while I could care less about a plate, you broke something else. Something much more valuable.~~”

“Something else, Lord?” The attendant looked around helplessly, seeing nothing but broken crockery and spilled baked goods. Next to him, the other servant was already backing away, straining desperately to make himself invisible, discorporeal, nonexistent.

“Yes.” The Possessed sat up straighter in his grand chair. “My train of thought. And that I cannot abide.” One huge, powerful arm rose slowly.

“No, Lord, please!”

The other attendant turned away and wrapped his arms around his head so he would not be able to see what was coming. A twitch of sickly green leaped from Hymneth’s armored hand, writhing and coiling like a giant heartworm. It struck the kneeling servant on the back of his neck. Instantly his entire body arched rearward as if struck by a heavy hammer. With a muffled scream he snapped forward to lie prone on the floor, arms outstretched to both sides, unconscious.

Wearied by this constant need to discipline his staff, Hymneth slumped back into his chair and waved diffidently. “Take him out of here. Then come back and clean up the rest of this mess.”

Shaking violently, the other servant slowly removed his hands from around his head and straightened. When he saw the figure of his friend lying on the floor, he screamed. It caught halfway in his throat, broken by the realization that the noise might offend the looming figure seated at the head of the table.

“Well?” the Possessed admonished him tersely. “Get on with it.”

“Yes—yes, my Lord.” Fighting to control his trembling, the other man reached down and grasped the unconscious servant by his wrists. Slowly, he began to drag the limp body from the room.

“Throw some water on him,” Hymneth ordered. “He’ll be all right. And maybe from now on he won’t drop dishes when I’m thinking.”

The other attendant did not reply. The Possessed’s meaning was clear. Indeed, it would be much harder for the young servant to drop dishes or anything else. Because he now had four limbs to carry them with: his two arms, and the pair of slick, green, sucker-laden tentacles that had sprouted noisomely from his shoulders.

“And when he comes around, tell him that he’s still on full pay!” Hymneth remembered to shout to the rapidly retreating menial.

Am I not the soul of tolerance and understanding? he thought. As always, it was a puzzlement to him why his people did not love him openly, instead of from within the pit of fear.

Dispensing such magnanimity always made him feel better. He had started to rise when Tergamet entered. One of his many advisers, he was subordinate to Peregriff, who was no doubt even now reviewing his Lord’s schedule for the day. Tergamet was wise, and the master of a magnificent long beard, but he had a regrettable tendency to tell Hymneth what he thought the Possessed wanted to hear, instead of the truth. Perhaps this was understandable, in light of the warlock’s occasional tendency to set ablaze specific portions of the anatomy of the attendants in his vicinity whenever a piece of particularly disagreeable news was conveyed to him. In that respect, he supposed Tergamet was braver than most.

“Yes, what is it?”

“And how is my Lord this morning?” The elderly adviser bowed as low as his aging back would allow.

“Impatient, as always. So don’t bother inquiring after my condition. I know that you, as much as

everyone else in this benighted pile of stone, would rejoice at the sight of me dead.”

Termaget fluttered a protesting hand. “Oh no, Lord! How can you think to say such a thing to me, one of your most trusted and loyal retainers!”

“I don’t trust anyone, old man, and loyalty is a commodity to be bought, like expensive wine and cheap women.” His irritation was growing. “What news? Not the harbor pilots again, with this nonsense about Krakens interfering with their work. I’ve told them how to fight back, and what poisons to use.”

“No, Lord. It is not the harbor pilots.” Eyes that still saw sharply rose to nearly meet his. “It is the Worm, Lord. It wishes to speak with you.”

Hymneth considered, then nodded slowly. At this news, the two small eromakadi that attended his ankles danced excitedly around his legs. Termaget was careful to keep them in view. Simple contact with either one could suck the life out of a man. The Possessed they merely bounced off like agitated spaniels.

“The Worm, you say. What about?”

The senior adviser bowed again and spread his arms wide. “I do not know, my Lord. It will speak only to you.”

“And quite properly so. Very good, Termaget. You may go.”

“Thank you, Lord.” Bowing and scraping, the old man retreated toward the main doorway. As he turned to depart, Hymneth considered whether to let the eromakadi take a playful nip at his heels. Nothing serious; just a week or so out of his remaining years. Days someone like Termaget would probably waste anyway. Hymneth decided against it, knowing that the old fellow probably would not see the humor in the situation.

His cape flowing behind him like blood running down the outside of a chalice, he exited the dining room. Instead of striding toward the audience chamber as he normally did this time of morning, he turned instead to his right in the middle of the main hall. The door there was bolted with a hex and locked with a spell, both of which yielded to the keys of his voice. He did not bother to seal it behind him. It would take a braver man or woman than dwelled in the castle to try the steps that began to descend immediately behind the door. Hex and spell were designed not to keep them out, but to seal something securely within.

Torches flared to life at his approach, the flames bowing briefly in his direction. As Hymneth descended the corkscrewing stairway, one of the eromakadi darted swiftly upward behind him to suck the life out of one torch. The flame screamed, a high-pitched conflagratory shriek, as it died. When Hymneth turned to reproach the black gust of horror, it hid behind its twin like a censured child.

Down the Lord of Ehl-Larimar went, below the sewers that carried water and waste away from the castle, below the dungeons where men and women and children wailed and whimpered in forgotten misery, below even the unshakable foundations of the massive fortress itself. Down until there was nothing left but the raw Earth—and the Pit that had been gouged from its heart.

At this depth nothing could live that basked in the light of the sun. In the perpetual darkness, things that rarely saw the surface burrowed and crept, mewling and cheeping softly to others of their own kind, hoping to avoid the mephitic, malodorous monstrosities armed with teeth and claw that would prey readily on anything that moved. An eerie glow came from the phosphorescent fungi that thrust bulbous, deformed stalks and heads above the surface of the Pit, giving it the appearance of some ghastly, unwholesome garden. In this place even the air seemed dead. All movement took place below the surface, out of sight, out of light.

Until Hymneth arrived, with eromakadi in tow.

Pausing on the last step, the final piece of clean, hewn stone that bordered the Pit, he gazed speculatively down into its depths. His boots, he knew, would require days of scrubbing to make them clean again. As he slowly lifted both arms up and out, his steady, sturdy voice shattered the diseased stillness.

“Alegemakh! Borun val malcuso. Show thyself, and speak!”

For a long moment there was nothing. No sound, no movement except the breathy stirring of the eromakadi. Then soil began to tremble, and shift, disturbed by some movement from below. Clumps of moist loam shuddered and individual particles of dirt bounced and quivered until at last they were thrust aside by something monstrous.

The Worm arose.

It burst forth from the earth, shedding dirt and uprooted fungi from its flanks. Pellucid mucus glistened along the length of its body. A length that no man, not even Hymneth the Possessed, had ever measured. The Worm might be ten feet long, or twenty, or a hundred. Or it might curl and coil a the way through to the other side of the Earth. No one knew. No one would ever know, because attempting the knowing meant death. Of all men, only Hymneth had power enough to meet the Worm in this place, chiseled out of the solid rock halfway between air and earth, and survive.

It lifted above him, shimmering and immense, its great tubular body arching forward like that of a questing serpent. Its upper girth, if not its length, was measurable. From where it emerged from the ground to its head it was as thick around as a good-sized tree. The last eight feet of it tapered to an almost comically small mouth, no bigger around than a barrel. From this darted and fluttered, like the tongue of a snake, a long, wet, flexible organ tipped with four tapering, sharp fangs that pointed forward. It was not a tongue, but a device for piercing the body of prey and sucking out their soft insides. The Worm’s diet was varied—it would eat dirt as readily as blood.

Darting away from their master’s side, the twin eromakadi began to feast on the light emitted by the bioluminescent fungi. Completely enveloping a helpless mushroom or toadstool, they would hover thus until its light had been consumed before moving on to another, leaving behind a shriveled and dying lump where before there had been life, however humble.

The Worm too pulsed with its own pale, necrotic glow, but they kept clear of that massive, hovering body. Not because they were afraid of it, but because they knew it was there to meet their master. And of all the things in the world, the eromakadi feared only Hymneth the Possessed.

Vestigial eyes no larger than small coins focused on the tall, armored figure waiting on the lowermost of the stone steps. Black as the eternal night in which they dwelled, they had neither pupil nor eyelids. But they recognized the tall figure. Long ago, Worm and man had struck an accord. Hymneth provided the Worm with—food. The Worm, in turn, kept a kind of watch over the realm of the Possessed. It had the ability to sense disturbances in That Which Had Not Yet Happened. The great majority of these it ignored.

But out on the fringes of the future it had detected something. Something active, and advancing, and imbued with might. In keeping with the covenant it had made with the man, it duly remarked upon this commotion.

“He comes. And he is not alone.”

Hymneth had lowered his arms. As the eromakadi spread small deaths throughout the chamber, he concentrated on the tapering head of the Worm swaying high above his own. *“Who comes, eater of dirt?”*

The Worm’s voice was a high hollowness. *“A master of the necromantic arts. A questioner of all that is unanswered. One who seeks justice wherever he treads. He comes this way from across the*

Semordria.”

“That is not possible. The eastern ocean is not a lake, to be crossed at will by casual travelers. They would have to travel far to the south, pass through the Straits of Duenclask, and then sail north against the current through the waters of the Aurreal.”

“A strong boat guided by a bold Captain brings him, and the three who journey by his side.”

“Only three?” Hymneth relaxed. This descent to the depths had been unnecessary after all. “That is a small army indeed.”

“I render no judgment. I speak only of what I sense.”

The Possessed chuckled softly, the crimson helmet reverberating with his laughter. “I will alert the navy to keep watch for any odd vessels entering the harbor. As always, I thank you for your attention Worm. But in this matter your insight seems to be sorely lacking.”

“Sense,” the Worm whispered. “Not judgment.” It was silent for several moments, its upper length weaving slowly back and forth above the churned surface of the Pit. “They come for the woman.”

That piqued Hymneth’s interest. “So the young Beckwith was not the last. I thought with putting paid to him and his crew I had seen the last of these misguided aristocrats. They worry me like fleas. He sighed. “Well, in the unlikely event that any of them should reach Ehl-Larimar I will tell Peregriff to alert the castle guards. But I have more confidence in the ocean. Even if they reach these shores my gunboats will stop them before they can cross the outer reefs.” He shook his head sadly.

“You would think they would recognize who they were dealing with, and stop shipping their sons off to be slaughtered. The error of false pride. As if running this kingdom didn’t make demands enough upon my time.”

“Feed me.” The immense, looming mass of the Worm swayed hypnotically back and forth, the flickering light of the stairway torches gleaming off its terrible piercing teeth. “I tire of soil. I have done my share. Feed me.”

“Yes, yes,” Hymneth replied irritably. He had already virtually forgotten all that the Worm had told him. As if a mere four possible invaders were anything to worry about, even if one happened to be a so-called master of the necromantic arts. There was only one dominating master of matters sorcerous and alchemical, and that was Hymneth the Possessed.

As he started back up the stairs he almost hoped these predicted intruders did manage to survive the impossible journey across the ocean. It had been a long time since he had fought a duel, and it would be good to have someone worthy to exercise his powers against. Though he doubted any of these potential assailants would qualify. To the best of his knowledge, there were no worthy masters living on the other side of the Semordria in the Thinking Kingdoms. For all the threat it posed to him the Worm might as well have kept the information to itself and not disturbed him. He departed disappointed.

“Feed me!” The reverberant moan rose insistently behind him.

Where the stairs began to disappear upward, Hymneth paused to lean over and peer downward. The head of the Worm vacillated below him now. “For information like that you deserve nothing. But I am mindful of the covenant between us. I’m sure Peregriff can find a few condemned, or condemnable, to bring to you. The axman will gain a rest.”

“I await.” With a wet, sucking sound the Worm began to withdraw into the damp earth. It would be there, Hymneth knew, with only its head above the surface, until the promised unfortunates were brought. Cast into the Pit, they would be pierced by the creature’s mouth parts, their internal organs and muscles and flesh liquefied, and the consequent putrid, gelatinous mush sucked out. No one could complain, Hymneth mused virtuously, that his dungeons suffered from overcrowding.

As he climbed upward, the two eromakadi reluctantly left the last of the surviving fungi to accompany him, impenetrable black clouds that hovered at his heels. Occasionally they would show very small, slanted red eyes, but most of the time they kept themselves as black as pitch. Visitors who knew what they represented were as terrified by their silence as by their shapes.

Hymneth had mounted nearly to the top of the corkscrewing stairwell when a voice, pure and melodious as the golden bells of a benign spirit, called down to him accusingly.

“So this is where you spend your time. In the depths of the Earth, consorting with demons!”

Taken aback by the unexpected intrusion, he tilted his head to peer upward. High above him, a portrait of beauty unsurpassed gazed down. Not even the look of utter disgust on her face could mar the perfection of her countenance.

“My beloved Themaryl, this is business of state! Nothing more. I converse in the depths. I do not consort.”

Her face furrowed with loathing. “You smell of things diseased and rotting. I thought—I thought we might talk, so I sought you out. I’m glad that I did, for it gave me the chance to see yet again your true self!” With that she whirled and fled upward, back to her rooms, back to the tower that she had made a prison for herself.

Bad timing, Hymneth thought in an agony of frustration. Of all the mornings and moments to parley with the Worm, of all the hours available to all the days, he had chosen the one time she had relented enough to descend from her steeple. Falling to his knees, he let out a cry of utter despair, knowing even as he did so that it would have no effect on her. Delighting in his anguish, the eromakadi clustered closer, inhaling of the darkness that had suddenly suffused his soul.

Slowly, his clenched fists fell away from the eye slits of his helmet. Someone had told her where he was. Someone had shown her where he was. Admittedly, he had decreed that she be given the run of the castle. But whatever fool had believed that included access to the Pit had, while displaying adherence to the letter of his command, shown excruciatingly bad judgment.

He rose to his feet. With all of Ehl-Larimar to administer and govern, he could not afford to tolerate those who exhibited bad judgment. Especially not those who did so in his own home, his sanctuary. When she had inquired as to his whereabouts, someone had taken her by the hand and guided her to the door that led to the Pit. It was a given. Mere directions would not have allowed her find the unprepossessing door by herself, much less to enter.

Talk. She had thought they might talk. It had been months since she had said a word to him other than to demand that he return her to her home and people, and today, this morning, she had been read to talk. A major breakthrough in their relationship shattered like cheap glass. Another setback when he might have hoped, just a little, for progress. And all because of someone’s bad judgment.

That night the villagers who lived below the castle, on the slopes of the mountains, put cotton in the ears of their children and laid extra blankets across their beds. They slept in the same rooms with them, sharing their beds or lying on linens spread out on the floor. They made sure all animals were secured tightly in their barns and corrals, paddocks and pens. They did this because of the screaming that drifted down from the castle like black snow.

Up above, the unfortunate were being punished for a lack of good judgment. It went on all through the night. As dawn neared it grew so bad that even the bats fled the vicinity. The children slept, but their parents were not so lucky. One family lost two horses, dead from heart attacks, and another a brace of goats that, maddened by the sounds, broke free of their pens and fled into the forest, never to be seen again.

All told, the slope-dwelling citizens of Ehl-Larimar counted themselves lucky when the sun finally

appeared over the mountaintops and the last of the shrieking died in a sudden, violent choking. They proceeded to go about their morning chores and business as if nothing had happened, as if the previous night had been only a bad dream, to be quickly forgotten like any bad dream. The women of the villages, however, found themselves with extra washing. Having spent the night oozing fearful sweat in great profusion, they and their husbands had stained many a nightdress beyond immediate reuse.

High above, government officials and administrators came and went, unaware of the frightfulness that had subsumed the fortress the night before. If they noticed anything out of the ordinary, it was that the castle's retainers moved a little faster than usual, and that they were less inclined to meet the eyes of visitors.

Far below, in the depths of the mountain, where earth met rock and where normal folk did not go, the Worm slept, its midsection swollen and bloated.

II

So still was the morning that the gull feather Simna let fall fell straight down. When it landed on the deck it just lay there, a puff of discarded dirty white that could easily be shifted by a waking woman's sigh. But it did not move.

It was more than an absence of wind. It was as if the air itself had become paralyzed, petrified in place. Though they had seen and experienced many things in their travels, the crew of the *Grömskette* murmured superstitiously among themselves while anxiously watching the skies for any sign of movement. But the clouds themselves remained exactly where they had appeared at sunup. It was one thing for a ship to be becalmed, quite another for the upper reaches of the sky itself to grow still as death.

The only way they knew for certain that they still lived in the realm of air was because they continued to breathe. It was possible to make a breeze by blowing, as Simna demonstrated when he dropped to all fours and blew hard against the abandoned feather. It scudded a little ways across the deck, twisting and flipping, before it settled once more into a motionless, trancelike state.

Just above the helm deck Stanager Rose stood in the rigging, shading her eyes with one hand as she surveyed the surrounding sea. It was smooth as a mirror, undisturbed by wave or, more importantly, wind. They were two days' sail out from the delta of the Eynharrowk on a due westerly heading, and no longer moving. Nothing was moving. Even the seabirds had deserted them in search of wind to help support their wings. It was uncanny, it was worrisome, and it was hot.

"Never been becalmed like this before," she murmured.

On the deck below, Hunkapa Aub was chatting with Priget, the helmswoman, and trying to learn something about the basics of open-ocean navigation. She had plenty of time to talk to him since the ship's wheel, left unattended, was not moving. Ahlita lay on the main deck, sleeping in the shade. The utter absence of a breeze was making the morning too hot even for him. Simna ibn Sind had tied a strip of colorful cloth around his forehead to soak up some of the perspiration. Though as unhappy with the unnatural stillness as anyone else aboard, the sight of Stanager Rose clinging to rigging helped to mitigate his unease.

Etjole Ehomba stood just below and to one side of the troubled Captain. Though no mariner, he knew well the moods of the sea, and right now the *Semordria* was not behaving in a proper maritime fashion. He had experienced still air before, while standing on different beaches in the vicinity of his village, but never anything like this. Heavy, hot, and stagnant, it tempted a man to take a whip to it, as if the very components of the atmosphere themselves had gone to sleep.

Stanager climbed down from the rigging. "The longer we sit here, the more of our supplies we waste. Too much of this and we'll be forced to return to the delta to reprovision."

“We could eat less,” Ehomba proposed, “and catch rainwater to supplement the ship’s stores.”

“If it rains,” she replied. “I don’t gamble with the lives of my crew. Or my passengers.”

“Do you ever gamble?” Simna’s forced cheerfulness fooled no one.

“Only when it’s a sure thing.” Ignoring him as usual, she strained to see past the bow. “May have to try kedging, but in which direction I haven’t decided. It would pain me to have to tuck tail and go back to the delta.” She squinted upward. All sails were set, and hung loose as dead ghosts from both masts.

“What’s this ‘kedging’?” Simna wanted to know.

She sighed. “Landsmen. We lower all the small boats and put the anchors in them. They row out as far as the lines will go, then drop anchor. This pulls the ship forward. Raise anchors and repeat, as many times as necessary until a breeze fills the sails. It’s hot, hard work. A last resort for desperate sailors.”

“I cannot go backward,” Ehomba told her. “I have spent too much time already just in going forward.”

“Then find me some wind,” she declared curtly, “so we can escape these cursed doldrums!”

“The sky-metal sword!” Simna blurted. “Surely even a moment’s work with that would bring down enough wind to move the ship.”

Stanager frowned. “What is the mad elf blabbering about?”

“Something possible, but dangerous.” Reaching back, Ehomba wrapped his fingers around the hilt of the sword. Simna looked on expectantly. Among those aboard the *Grömsketter*, only he knew what that enchanted blade of otherworldly metal was capable of in the hands of his tall friend.

Reluctantly, Ehomba released his grip. Simna looked pained.

“Why the hesitation, bruther?”

“It is a chancy thing to consider, Simna, and not something to be attempted in haste. I have to think first how best to go about it. Too little wind is not a problem. But too much wind could shred the sails or even capsize the ship. And what if I thrust it wrongly to the heavens and call down another piece of sky? Here there are no holes in the ground for us to hide in, and nowhere to run.”

“That’s fine, Etjole.” The swordsman made placating motions. “Take your time. Decide how to hold the weapon, which way to point it, what angle to incline the blade against the Earth. Only when you’re satisfied that you know what you’re doing should you go ahead.”

Ehomba eyed his friend speculatively. “And if I’m not satisfied?”

Simna shrugged. “Then we sit. And sweat. And try to think of something else.”

A thin smile curled the Captain’s delectable upper lip. “I’ve heard you boasting endlessly to the crew, swordsman. Perhaps we should put you in a small boat behind the *Grömsketter* and let you jabber there all you wish. Maybe that would generate hot air enough to fill the mains’l just enough to get us moving.”

He smiled back. “You don’t like me very much, do you, Captain?”

“Not very much, no. If you were under my command, I’d have you swabbing decks and bailing bilges all the way to Doroune.”

“I wouldn’t mind being under your command, Stanager—depending on the commands, of course. He grinned irrepressibly.

She turned away, disgusted. “You are incorrigible!”

“Actually, I’m from a little village near Rakosy. Incorrigible is a bigger town that lies to the northwest.”

“Boat ho!”

At the cry, everyone tilted their heads back to look up at the mainmast. The lookout was gesturing slightly to port.

It took the better part of an hour for the small, single-masted craft to drift into view. Stolid and unimpressive, a wholly utilitarian little boat, its aft half was piled high with pilchard and sardine, so much so that it rode lower in the water than otherwise would have been expected. Nets fashioned of strong cord and spotted with cork floats hung from the boom and over the sides. Its lone sail hung as limp from the mast as did those of the *Grömsketter*.

The single occupant was busy hauling in one of the nets, but not too busy to wave at the much larger vessel.

“Ayesh!” the fisherman sang out. “What ship?”

From near the bow, the first mate responded. “Good fishing?” Terious added by way of making conversation.

Grinning through his white-flecked beard, the lone sailor gestured at his catch. “As you see.”

“You’re not afraid to be out of sight of land, all by yourself?” the mate inquired. Several of the other members of the crew had moved to the railing to watch the discourse. In the detestable stillness any diversion was a welcome one.

“Not I. Crice is the name, sir, and I am known throughout the delta for my bravery.” He indicated his mast and sail. “I know the winds hereabouts better than any man, you see, and am always confident of finding one to carry me home.”

Cupping her hands to her mouth, Stanager shouted across to the solitary harvester of the sea. “Ayesh, can you find one for us, good sir? We have been stalled here this past day and a half.”

“Sorry.” He waved again. “I have the last of my catch to bring in and then I must return home. You know that every ship must find its own wind. Not all have my skill.”

Stanager flushed, her cheeks reddening. It was an oblique insult and probably unintended, but it still set the Captain’s blood to racing. When it came to seamanship, she took a back seat to no man or woman. This solitary sailor who stank of fish guts and oil was taunting her, albeit gently.

Persistent he might be, even irritating, but Simna knew when to keep his mouth shut. Observing the look on the Captain’s beautiful face, he sidled away from her and closer to Ehomba.

“What do you think, long brother?” He nodded in the direction of the little fishing boat. “Is his an empty boast?”

“I was admiring his catch.” Ehomba gestured at the glistening mound that weighed down the boat. “All small fish, all silver of side. Very difficult to see under normal conditions. When looking down into the water from the deck of a boat, it is hard to separate such a school from sunlight. But in these conditions, with the surface absolutely calm and undisturbed by wind, they would stand out much more clearly to a man with a net.”

Simna’s brows furrowed. “So the man is a good fisherman and brave to boot. What of that?”

“While he has been working and talking I have been studying everything on his boat. Though more than a little windy himself, I think he is no natural master of wind. He does not have the look. But there is no mistaking the confidence he has in his seamanship.” Raising his voice, he called out to their visitor.

“Gatherer of fish, that is a most unusual bottle I see resting by your tiller. Though large and well blown it does not appear to hold drink, or anything else. Yet I espy something moving within. What does it contain?”

So startled by this unexpected inquiry was the fisherman that he dropped the net he was hauling in, letting it splash back over the gunwale. Once back in the water its contents, writhing and convulsing,

wildly finned their way to freedom.

“It’s only a bottle, sir. You have—remarkable eyes.”

“From watching over my herd, looking out for predators. What is in the bottle?” Everyone on board the *Grömsketter* was watching Ehomba now. Men and women who had been resting in the shade rose from their places to crowd the railing.

“Nothing, good sir.” Ignoring the fact that he had just lost the majority of his most recent catch, the fisherman resumed hauling in the one net that remained hanging over the side. He looked and sounded slightly agitated. “It’s just an empty bottle that I carry about with me. For storing caught rainwater.”

Simna was staring at his tall friend. Etjole was on to something, had seen something, he knew. But what? Now that the herdsman had singled it out, he too located the large bottle that rested near the tiller of the small boat. It was big enough to hold several gallons, with a bulbous body and a narrow, tapering neck that terminated in an elaborate metallic stopper the color of pewter. Hard as he stared, he could not discern any contents.

Ehomba, however, felt differently. Strongly enough to argue about it.

“I can see movement within the glass. To catch rainwater anyone would use a bottle with a much wider mouth. I know: I have had to do so in dry country on more than one occasion. So what is it, fisherman? Why are you lying to us?”

When the last of the net had been hauled in and piled on the deck of the little craft, its owner took seat in the stern, resting one arm on the tiller. “You have no weapons that can reach me or you would have shown them by now. So I will tell you, landlord of sharp eyes. The knowledge will do you no good.”

Baffled, Stanager had moved to stand close to Simna. “What nonsense is he prattling?” she whispered. “I can make sense neither of what he is saying nor of your friend.”

Inclining his head close to hers, the swordsman murmured a reply. “I’m not sure, but Ehomba is a strange man. A good friend, to be sure. Straightforward and dependable. But different from such as you and I. He knows many things. I believe him to be a great sorcerer.”

“What, him?” Almost, she laughed aloud. Almost.

“Say then that he is a sometime student of that which would mystify the rest of us. If he says there’s something in that bottle, then I believe him, though I can’t see it myself.” He pointed. “It lies there, by the stern.”

“I see it,” she admitted, leaning closer. After a moment she shook her head dubiously. “It looks empty to me.”

“Hoy, but then why is our trawling friend looking so uneasy, and speaking of weapons? Could it be that the bottle contains something of great value, whose nature he is wary of revealing?” In the course of their intense whispering his arm had slipped around her waist. Intent upon the byplay between herdsman and fisher, she took no notice of it, and thus allowed it to remain in place.

Lifting the bottle by its narrow neck, Crice held it up for all to see. Half the crew saw only a thick-walled container, perfectly blown and devoid of bubbles in the glass, sealed with a peculiarly sculpted pewter stopper. Among the rest there were many who thought they saw movement within the translucent vessel. Given the distance between the two craft, it was difficult to say what, if anything, occupied the bottle’s interior. But it was now clear to the most sharp-eyed among the crew that something did.

Whatever it was, Ehomba had been first to spy it. Among them all, he was the only one to have an idea what it might be. Convinced of his invincibility, the fisherman proceeded to confirm the herdsman’s suspicions.

“Here’s your wind, sailors! You think yourselves masters of the sea and all that’s above and below it—but I, Crice, command the air!” He held the glass container a little higher. “Here in this bottle I have all the wind that covers this portion of the sea. Found it at the bottom of a chest in a ruined ship. Must have been a thousand years old, she was, and reeking of magic fantastic and decayed. But the stopper on this bottle was intact, and I, yes I, discovered by myself how to open and close it. I let a little out when I need it and keep the rest shut up when I don’t.” He gestured at the perfectly flat, motionless water on which both craft floated. “That way I can see the fish I seek as clearly as if looking through a window. When I have enough, I let out just the right amount of wind in precisely the appropriate direction to carry me home.”

“No wonder he’s not afraid to travel out of sight of land,” Simna whispered. His hand tightened a little on the Captain’s waist.

“Not if he can control all the wind in this part of the ocean, no.” Pressing forward against the railing, Stanager raised her voice. “Ayesh, fisherman, can you not let us have back a little of that wind?”

“Every ship must find its own,” he reiterated implacably. “And if I give some to you, that will mean less for my sail. How much do you think a bottle like this can hold, anyway? I found the bottle, captured the wind, and now it’s mine! Seek out your own breezes.”

Sitting back down in the stern, he pointed the neck of the bottle toward his mast. Slowly and very carefully, he unscrewed the pewter stopper just a little.

Emerging from the glass alembic, a gust of wind immediately filled his small sail, sending its thrusting curve billowing outward. Seeing this, several sailors on board the *Grömsketter* looked to their own masts, only to see their own sails luffing uselessly against spar and line. Yet to look at the little boat was to see it beginning to accelerate with a freshening breeze astern. Except no breeze advanced from the vicinity of the stern. It had emerged straight from the bottle that the fisherman was now firmly restoppering.

“Etjole, do something!” Simna blurted anxiously. At the same time, Stanager became aware of the arm coiled around her waist and stepped away. Her expression was a mixture of anger and—something else. “If he gets away with all the wind from this part of the sea we could be stuck here for weeks!”

“I know.” Ehomba had not taken his eyes from the little boat heavily laden with fish and its contrary master. “I need a stone.”

“A stone?” Simna knew better than to question his companion. If Ehomba had declared that he needed a purple pig, the swordsman would have done his best to find one.

Actually, on board a ship the size of the *Grömsketter*, finding the pig might have been the easier task. Of all the lands they had journeyed through together, of all the astounding places they had visited and countries they had traversed, here was the first that was devoid of stones, and here the first time Ehomba had required one.

“Ballast!” the swordsman yelled. “There must be ballast in the hold!”

Stanager was quick to disappoint him. “We carry base metals. Ingots of iron and copper that we can trade with the inhabitants of the towns on the other side of the Semordria. You’ll find no rock in the belly of the *Grömsketter*.”

“Well then, there must be at least one stone somewhere on this ship! Firestone in the galley, to protect her wooden walls.”

The Captain shook her head sadly. “Firebrick.”

“In someone’s sea chest, then. A memento of home, a worry stone, anything! If Ehomba says that

he needs a stone, that means he needs—” Simna broke off, gaping at his tall friend.

Reaching into a pocket of his kilt, the herdsman had removed the small cotton sack of “beach pebbles” he had carried with him all the way from his home village. As Simna looked on, Ehomba selected the largest remaining, a flawless five-carat diamond of deeper blue hue than the surrounding sea, and shoved the remaining stones back in his pocket.

“No, long bruther.” The swordsman gestured frantically. “Not that. We’ll find you a rock. There’s got to be a rock somewhere on this barge; an ordinary, everyday, commonplace, worthless rock. Whatever it is you’re thinking of doing—don’t.”

The herdsman smiled apologetically at his friend. In his hand he held a stone worth more than the swordsman could hope to earn in a lifetime. In two lifetimes. And somehow, Simna knew his friend was not planning to convert it into ready currency.

“Sorry, my friend. There is no time.” Pivoting, he returned his gaze to the little boat, now starting to pick up speed beneath the press of the freed breeze its sail had captured. “Soon he will be out of range.”

“I don’t care what—” the swordsman halted in midcomplaint. “Out of range? Out of range of what?”

“Rocks,” Ehomba explained simply—so simply that it was not an explanation at all, but only another puzzlement. Raising his voice, he directed his words to the retreating fisherman. “Truly you are the master of winds! But you must control them through spells and magicks. No mere bottle that fits in a man’s lap can contain more than the air that Nature has already placed inside.”

“You think not, do you?” The fisherman turned in his seat, one arm resting easily on the tiller. “You’d be surprised, traveler, what a bottle can hold.”

“Not a bottle that small,” Ehomba yelled back. “I wager it is not even made of glass, but some marvel of the alchemist’s art instead!”

“Oh, it’s glass, all right. Alchemist’s glass perhaps, but glass incontestably. See?” Holding the bottle aloft and grinning, he tapped the side with a small marlinspike. The smooth, slightly greenish material clinked sharply.

As soon as the fisherman had begun to lift the bottle, Ehomba had placed the blue diamond in his mouth. At first a startled Simna suspected that the herdsman intended to swallow it, though for what purpose or reason he could not imagine. Not knowing what to think, Stanager had simply looked on in silence.

That was when Ehomba began to inhale. Simna ibn Sind had seen his friend inhale like that only once before, when on the Sea of Aboqua he had consumed an entire eromakadi. But there was no darkness here, no ominous roiling haze with luminous red eyes, not even a stray storm cloud. The sky like the air, was transparent.

The herdsman’s chest expanded—and expanded, and swelled, until it seemed certain he would burst. Those members of the crew close enough to see what was happening gawked open-mouthed at the phenomenon of the distending herdsman while Stanager, brave as she was, began to back away from that which she could not explain and did not understand. Hunkapa Aub looked up in dumb fascination while Ahlitah, as usual, slept on, oblivious to what was happening around him.

Just when it seemed that the skin of the herdsman’s chest must surely rupture, exploding his internal organs all over the deck and railing, he exhaled. To say explosively would be to do injustice to the sound that emerged from his chest and mouth. It reverberated like gunpowder, echoing across not only the deck but the sea as well. The force of it blew its perpetrator backwards, lifting Ehomba’s feet off the deck and sending him crashing into the smaller railing that delimited the fore edge of the helm

deck. Hunkapa ran over to make sure the herdsman was all right.

As for Simna, he remained at the railing, realizing that Ehomba had expelled more than just air. There had been one other thing in his mouth, and it was not his tongue that had been violently discharged across the water.

In the little boat, the disdainful fisherman was preparing to tap his bottle a second time with the metal marlinspike to demonstrate the qualities of its composition when the ejected diamond struck it squarely in the middle, shattering the glass and sending green-tinted shards flying in all directions. The fisherman had barely an instant to gape at the ruined container, its neck and stopper still clutched tightly in one hand, before the winds it had held burst to freedom.

All the winds that had swept a section of sea greater than a man could see in any direction, and all of it released at once.

“Etjole, you right still?” The shaggy countenance of Hunkapa Aub was leaning low over his lanky friend. Ehomba sat, dazed but conscious, against the railing.

“I am...” he started to reply. Then a sound reached his ears—a rising sound—and he yelled out even as he wrapped his arms tightly around the nearest post. “Grab something and hang on! Everybody grab someth—”

The liberated winds struck the *Grömsketter* amidships, howling like a thousand crazed goblins suddenly released from an asylum for insane spirits as they tore through the masts and rigging. Struck hard enough to cause the sturdy vessel to heel sharply to starboard. For a terrifying moment, in the midst of that awesome roar, Stanager was afraid the ship was going to turn turtle. Her list reached seventy degrees. But as the initial blast began to subside, the ballast in her hold asserted itself. With maddening slowness, she began to roll back onto an even keel.

Clinging to the rigging, her skin and clothing soaked with gale-driven spray, the Captain screamed orders to the crew. Stays were drawn taut, the mainsail boom secured, the wheel steadied. Somehow, the sails held. Working his way aft, Terious Kermarkh silently blessed a succession of unnamed sailmakers. Tough fabric caught the wind and contained it.

But with demented gusts blowing from every direction, the sails kept wrapping themselves around the masts, making it impossible for the ship to maintain a heading, any heading. In the teeth of the disordered, chaotic gale there was no choosing a course.

Terious fought his way to within shouting distance of the helm deck. Standing below, he yelled up to the wheel. “Captain, we’ve got to get out of this! We’re starting to take on water!”

“Keep the fores’l reefed, Mr. Kermarkh! All hands hold to stations!” Maintaining a firm grip on a storm line, her experienced sea legs absorbing the impact of every pitch and roll, she staggered over where Hunkapa Aub and Simna ibn Sind hovered solicitously over their tall friend. Awakened from his sleep by the sudden, unexpected storm, the black litah stood nearby. The heaving, pitching deck did not concern him, not with four sets of powerful claws at his disposal to dig into the wood.

“Mr. Ehomba, you’ve taken us from the doldrums to the roaring forties, from not a ghost of a breeze to all the winds of the four corners of the compass. But they’ve been let loose all together and all at once, and as a consequence blow from all directions unaligned. You got us into this, now you have to get us out, or we’ll sit here and spin like a top until we sink!”

Still dazed from the blow to the back of his head, Ehomba accepted the help of his friends to rise. Simna helped him up. Once erect, Hunkapa embraced him in an immovable grasp that held him steady.

Observing the anarchic weather that had enveloped the *Grömsketter*, Ehomba thanked his friends and told Hunkapa to release him. The broad-shouldered man-beast complied reluctantly. All kept a

wary watch on the herdsman as he half climbed, half slid down the steps that led to the main deck and disappeared below. Moments later he emerged with the sky-metal sword gripped tightly in one hand.

Simna eyed him uncertainly. Along with everyone else, he had to shout to make himself heard above the howl of clashing winds. "Hoy, long bruther, what do you want with that? We need less wind, not more of it!"

"Not less, Simna." Ehomba wiped perspiration from his eyes and forehead. "What we have is what we need. It only wants some guidance."

Climbing back onto the helm deck, he made his way to the stern railing. There he tried to assume a solid stance, but the pitching and rolling of the ship made it impossible. Without using at least one hand to grip a stay or line, he kept stumbling from side to side, forward or back. Leaning against the railing helped a little, but when the bow of the *Grömsketter* rose sharply, the motion threatened to pitch him over the side.

"This is not working," he declared aloud.

"I can see that, bruther!" Spitting seawater, Simna clung to the railing next to him. "What do you need? What do you want?" Spume-flecked wind shrieked in their ears.

"My feet nailed to the deck, but that could cause problems later." Grimly searching the ship, the herdsman espied the big cat standing foursquare and four-footed to the left of the helm, as stable as the mainmast. "Ahlitah! I need your help!"

"What now?" Grumbling, the cat released its grip on the battered teak and turned. His extended claws held the decking as firmly as crampons on a glacier.

"I need someone to brace me," Ehomba told him. "Can you do it?"

The big cat considered, yellow eyes glowing like lamps in the darkness of the rising storm. When lightning flashed, it was the same color as the master of the veldt's pupils. "It'll be awkward. My forelegs are not arms."

Ehomba pondered, then shouted again. "Hunkapa! Brace yourself against Ahlitah and hold me! Hold me as high up as you can!"

"Yes, Etjole! Hunkapa do!"

The lithah set itself immovably against the back railing, the claws of each paw nailing themselves to the deck. Then Hunkapa Aub stepped across the cat's back and straddled him, locking his shaggy ankles beneath the feline belly. With Hunkapa thus anchored to the lithah, and Ahlitah fastened firmly to the deck, Hunkapa put huge, hirsute hands around the herdsman's waist and lifted him skyward. The *Grömsketter* rocked in the wind and waves, she rolled and pitched, but on her helm deck the unlikely pyramid of cat, man-beast, and herdsman rode rigid and straight.

Holding the haft of the sky-metal sword in both hands, Ehomba raised the otherworldly blade skyward, lifting it into the storm. When the flat, etched blade began to glow an impossibly deep, spectral blue, Simna immediately sought cover from something that he knew was more powerful than the conflicted storm itself.

A gust struck the pulsating glow—and bounced off, shearing away to the west. A complete concentrated squall bore down on Ehomba, only to find itself shattered into a thousand timid zephyrs. Swinging the great blade, secure in Hunkapa Aub's powerful grasp, Ehomba battled the winds.

No stranger to danger, Stanager crouched close by Simna and looked on in astonishment. "Ayesh, was wrong to doubt you about your friend: It's a sorcerer he is!"

"Hoy, ask and he'll tell you it's not him but the sword that wrecks the magic. A sword he did not make himself, but that was given to him. No wizard he, he'll tell you again and again. Just a herder of cattle and sheep lucky enough to have learned friends."

She looked at him through the wind and rain. “Then which is he, Simna? What is the truth?”

“The truth?” He considered a moment, then broke out in the irrepressible grin that, when words failed, defined him. “The truth is a riddle wrapped in an enigma—or sometimes in a nice piece of hot flat bread fresh from the oven. That’s my friend Etjole.”

Stanager Rose was a woman of exceptional beauty and competence—but not a great deal of humor. “In other words, you don’t know whether he’s actually an eminent alchemist, or just a vector for the sorcery of others.”

Simna nodded, rain dripping from his hair and chin. “Just so. But this I do know: I’ve seen renowned swordsmen battle a dozen skilled opponents at a time, I’ve seen them fight off beasts armed with fang and claw, I’ve watched others deflect the attacks of mosquitoes the size of your arm and thorn trees with minds of their own—but this is the first time I’ve seen anyone use a blade to fence with wind!”

Indeed, Ehomba was not merely parrying the gusts that swirled around him, but doing so in a manner that saw one after another line up aft of the ship. Deflected by the weaving, arcing sword and its attendant indigo aurora, gale after gale was forcefully merged to blow steadily from astern. Gradually the *Grömsketter* stopped sailing in ragged circles and resumed a westerly heading. The storm continued to rage, but now the bulk of it, aligned by blows from Ehomba’s blade, raged from directly behind the ship, driving it across the wild Semordria in the direction it had originally been traveling.

Steer the winds as he might, Ehomba could not subdue them, not even with the wondrous sword. Priget once more gained control of the helm, and managed to keep the ship on course, but before the herdsman had been able to get the winds organized and under control the *Grömsketter* had taken a terrible beating.

“We need a respite.” Stanager had taken one half of the wheel, opposite her helmswoman. “A blow from the blow.” She flung her head to one side and slightly back, flipping sodden red hair out of her face. “An island in whose protected lee we could shelter would be best, but none lie close on our chosen heading.” Tilting back her head, she examined the storm-swept sky. “Of course, we are no longer sailing on our original heading. I think we have been blown many leagues northward.”

“Put me down, Hunkapa.” As the hulking biped obediently complied, Ehomba smiled up at him. “You did well, my hairy friend. Are you all right?”

Through the rain and darkness the bulky figure beamed at him. “Hunkapa like to help. Hunkapa strong!” Long, powerful arms reached up and out, as if to encompass all ocean and sky.

“Strong enough.” The herdsman blinked away rain, staring forward. Simna was at his side, trying to follow his friend’s line of sight.

“What is it, bruther? What do you see? An island?” His tone was hopeful. Not that he cared overmuch for the condition of the *Grömsketter*, so long as she continued to float, but as a landsman raised on open plains and prairies, he felt himself overdue to stand on something that did not precipitously and unpredictably drop away from beneath his feet.

“No, not an island,” Ehomba replied as softly as he could, given the need to be heard above the wind. “Something else.” Turning, he addressed the stalwart redhead. “Captain, I think if you head your ship fifteen degrees to port you may find the respite you are looking for!”

Squinting into the squall, she tried to descry what her singular passenger was pointing out. “I don’t see anything, Mr. Ehomba.”

“Please, call me Etjole. If you do not see anything, then you *are* seeing it.”

Her expression contorted and she barked at the tall southerner’s companion. “Simna! What

nonsense is he talking?"

The swordsman could only shrug. "~~Sorcerers speak a language unto themselves, but I've learned~~ these past many weeks to heed his advice. If he says to sail toward nothing, I'd be the first man to set my helm for it."

Stanager mulled over this second suggested absurdity in succession. "I see no harm in sailing toward nothing." Her gaze drifted upward. "The storm holds steady behind us. A little to port or starboard will not strain the stays any more than they already are. Helm to port!" she ordered Priget. Working in concert, the two women forced the wheel over.

It was late afternoon before they arrived at the place Ehomba had espied through the depths of the tempest. It was not, as he had told Simna, an island. Nor was it land of any kind. But it was a place of calm, and rest, in the midst of raging windblown chaos. That did not mean it was a haven for the exhausted crew of the *Grömsketter* and their battered ship. What the herdsman had seen and what they were about to enter into proffered an entirely unnatural and potentially perilous tranquillity. It was a valley.

A valley in the sea.

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