

How I long for the days when I could wander to a tavern and cry 'Gather round, gather round!' and have the commotion and bustle cease as all eyes attentively turned to me. But with the Muse now turned to crueller endeavors, there seems little cause for a witty, clever talespinner - though I have heard tell that those of Delve do respect a proper story. Still, with much of the world too busy to sit and listen, I've instead resorted to recording my thoughts here, for the enjoyment and enlightenment of future generations.

It was a noble calling for a noble man, to join the Paladins. He even looked the part: even at his young age, Jhakor's shoulders were broad, he stood confidently and with perfect posture, thick brown hair upon his head wore short and cleanly-cut. He was clean-shaven as well, his eyes a bright, eager blue. The second eldest of a merchant family, he had been surrounded by warriors and fighters since birth. His father supplied every guard in Ashtan with their equipment, and as he grew older and less nimble had taken it upon himself to train his sons to wield weapons and display armor in a soldierly manner, to better demonstrate his product. As such, Jhakor and the others were well-educated in the means and methods of war equipment- and of course, educated in more traditional manners as well: the family was rather well-off and spared no expense in rearing their children.

With many fond memories of home, and assuring his mother that he would still write and visit when able, he had announced his plans some two months ago and began preparing to leave. And so when the first of Ios rolled around, he packed up his possessions that he had selected for himself and went downstairs to have one last meal with his family. All

looking torn between proud of him, and sad to see him go, he was given the seat of

honor at the head of the table, heaps of meat and greens and countless other delights had been prepared for him by his mother and the servants, intending to give him the best sending-off they could manage.

All too soon for Jhakor it was over, the food gone and his family settling in to digest, the conversation lulling. He sighed and pushed to his feet, moving to kiss his mother on the cheek and ruffle the hair of his little sister, promising to them all, "When I can, I'll come back. I promise to do you all proud, and I love you all." He paused here, popping his older brother on the arm, adding on, "Even you, sometimes." With a faint, bitter sweet smile, he turned to go - only to find his father blocking his path with a bundle. "Son, every knight needs swords," says his father. "I got you these - this matching set is of the highest quality we've gotten in two months, I set them aside for you." He passed the bundle over to Jhakor, unrolling it in his arms to display two longswords within supple leather sheaths. "The hilt have our family crest engraved on it," said his father, choking up a little - which was quite unusual for such a normally stoic man, "No matter what happens, you're always our son and we're always proud of you. And I hope our final gift keeps you safe in your travels." Jhakor stared down at the blades - they were far finer than anything he had ever personally gotten to wield, suited more to a general than himself. Gilded with silver designs, the hilt had been inscribed with the family crest, a blade, coin and a spear, coin resting over where the blade and spear cross. As he fastened on the sheaths to his belt, he promised his father quietly, "I'll represent us well." With that, his own eyes slightly damp, he hugged his father and mother one last time, and stepped out the door, scooping up his pack and slinging it over his shoulder as he went.

Though I am quite sure his trip to Enorian was quite eventful, precious few records exist, and I doubt any reading wish to hear of how he took precisely eight hundred thousand and ninety-two steps in reaching the city, camped six times and stumbled nineteen. It is suffice to say that he left Ashtan at the first of the month and made it to Enorian, enlisting on 10 Ios - the first of spring. His class consisted of a mere eight students, which was quite low given the time period, but true all the same. The first few days were the hardest for Jhakor. They weren't practicing sword-play or learning how to train falcons, no. Instead they were scrubbing floors, polishing the weapons of others, taught history and lectured on the rules of fair fighting and honor. He understood, of course, why this was all happening - it was quite important to know how to clean and act properly, but his swords had been confiscated on the first day. The Pages were not permitted to carry weapons of their own while living there, unless they were out on official business, and with the supervision of a knight - too many 'accidents' and fights had broken out in the past, and with such a small group, the guildmaster was loathe to have one lose a finger to a peer. Without his swords, away from his family for the first time, Jhakor was quite homesick.

Despite being uncomfortable and out of sorts, he also proved himself quite competent. He could already read and write at an exceptional level, quite the smart young man. His physique was also noteworthy, while the rest of the applicants tended to be somewhere on the lighter side, Jhakor was strong, almost a mountain compared to the youngest and smallest of them. This was not lost on those training him, and after he easily passed his Page examination, there was something of a disagreement about which knight would be permitted to train such a promising Squire. In the end, as these things normally go, it was the guild master who happened to get his

way - surprising absolutely everyone, I'm sure. And so Jhakor began to train under the guildmaster. Never had that man's armor shone so brightly, many pointed out (behind his back, of course). And never before had he been in such a good mood either - he was elected guild master in his youth and had remained in the post for some years now, his age beginning to show, manifesting in a slightly grumpy nature given his tired, aching bones. Still, as far as knight mentors go, he was quite capable of teaching Jhakor exactly what he needed to know. Jhakor's swordplay grew to an excellent level swiftly, his natural talent paired with a competent teacher with years and years of actual combat experience. He was able to best any in his class in single combat, his sword work with longswords entirely unmatched.

For Jhakor, as it grew close to the anniversary of his first year with the Paladins, he began to feel more at home. His peers liked and respected him, as did the older knights. His mentor took care of him and treated him exceptionally well, save for the occasional days where his joints pained him greatly. He received letters from home regularly and had been permitted to have his swords back, once he became a Squire. All in all, Jhakor's life went well. Happy, healthy and content, he still counted the best day of his time there as the anniversary of his first year.

As was customary, the first year of a Paladin is a test of sorts, all on its own. Falcons that are well-trained take time to raise properly, and are notoriously difficult to control if one is not ready. So a year was passed in those days before one was permitted to have a creature of their own, though of course no mention of this was made to the incoming classes. Those who stayed for a year were granted the right to own their own falcon. Jhakor's tiny class of eight had proved remarkably resilient, each quite competent in their own way, and not a single one had left. They

had known for some time that it was coming, but they knew not when - days had passed where they practiced whistling and issuing commands to an imagined ally, and all were eager to actually acquire one of the famous creatures. And so on the 10th of Ios, they were taken to the hatchery to receive their birds.

For some, it was an apprehensive moment. For others, it was an exciting one. But for Jhakor, it was a moment of sheer awe. They stepped inside, were issued their falconry gloves, and then one at a time, they were given their falcon. Jhakor was last in line, waiting patiently for his turn despite his absolute wonder at the creatures - he watched as each student carefully took the weight of the bird on their arm, stroked their head and spoke softly to their new ally, all smiles. And when it was his turn to receive a creature, he was almost beside himself with wonder. Passed over carefully across the counter was the most magnificent creature he had ever seen. Sleek, well-maintained wings of mottled brown covered the bird's form. Comparatively, it was likely one of the smallest of the bunch, but to Jhakor that didn't matter - one look into her eyes and he was utterly enamored. Carefully, he lifted a finger and lightly stroked its beak, smiling all the while. So caught up was he in the moment that he quite forgot to move away from the hatchery desk, standing awkwardly in front of the man, the rest of his class off to the side. It wasn't until he heard a ripple of giggles and laughter that he noticed, reddening slightly and moving to join the class - slowly, of course, so as to not jostle his newfound friend. The bird, for her part, took instantly to him as well - they were inseparable. So long as Jhakor was not somewhere inside resting, the falcon was with him. It lazily circled overhead while they sparred, seeming to take great pride in watching her master defeat his peers in combat. It perched on a tree outside the window while Jhakor studied, content to simply watch over him. And even when

dismissed to go to the sanctuary for its own rest, the creature would circle once, twice, thrice before going, clearly unwilling to say goodbye so soon.

The half-year that training consisted of was not wasted. Jhakor found himself loving his work and studies, and his falcon. The knights-to-be were never permitted rest during the day, always some assigned task or other to work on. Jhakor's favorite was, he found, the writing portion. His handwriting was leagues ahead of his peers, as he had been taught to read and write by his parents, who insisted on proper penmanship. He even began keeping his own journal during this time, to practice his writing more. One of the first things he bought with his pay was a compact writing kit - the ink was stored in a hardy wooden vial, the quill was crafted cleverly from a piece of wood as well, with a silver cap to go over it to protect it from wear and tear in the field. It even came with a book, all of which fit neatly into a compact case which could be stored easily in a bag or pack.

He was an excellent student as well, devouring whole course material on history and ethics. Political schemes were something a merchant of Ashtan was versed in, to varying degrees, and his familiarity here again gave him an edge. It was unusual for such a well-rounded man to find his way to the guild, and the teachers took great enjoyment from working with him, while his peers used him as a standard to measure up to. Competitive, he found himself having to work harder and harder to remain at the top of his class, and he was rather proud of the effort his classmates made to keep pace with him.

Combat training was a different beast entirely. He was well-trained at fighting, though it

was mostly fencing and looking good while swinging weapons. Most of his classmates were trained at looking like shit and still killing someone. For most of training, each fight played out in the same way. Jhakor and his opponent would square off together in the ring, training swords drawn, and falcon circling overhead. At the whistle, the two would lunge in and start exchanging blows, with classmates shouting encouragement and advice (mostly consisting of less-than-approved tactics, like ‘Knee him! Gouge his eyes!’) while the instructor tried to make his or her explanations and tips heard above the clamor. Jhakor would parry blow after blow, but was never able to read where his opponent was going to swing next. With no style to speak of, the strike could be with any part of the sword, anywhere, and quite probably a place that the attacker didn’t even plan for it to go. The falcons would dart in from time to time, not actually landing any strikes, but practicing their use as well, swooping in and pulling up just before making contact with the foe their master was dueling. And finally, Jhakor would mis-read an unreadable swing and miss a block, taking a solid thunk to the chest, or hand, or knee, and the fight would be over without him having swung a single time in exchange. He was frustrated, of course, that his skill couldn’t be used against his classmates. He had fancied himself good at fighting, but it was discouraging to lose again and again, without even the chance to land a hit in return.

Finally tired of seeing him get whailed on, one of the drillmasters pulled him aside after practice. As the rest of his class made their way out of the gate as the sun started to set, with many a curious glance back, he was made to stay behind. Slumped, miserable and slightly worried about what the man would say (he was imposing to, as men go. Black-haired, dark skinned and quite burly, favoring a warhammer over all other weapons). But, to his surprise, he wasn’t there to get reamed. “Swords up,” the drillmaster ordered, pulling out a set of practice

longswords himself. Jhakor hesitantly raised his guard, and the drillmaster launched into an attack. It was as if he had been fighting with his eyes closed the entire time, and had only just now opened them: each swing he could almost feel where it would go, wooden blade effortlessly parrying the strike the drillmaster made, diverting it elsewhere. Before he even quite knew what was going on, he found himself comfortable enough to strike back - a high shot was knocked away and he returned with a high strike of his own, catching the surprised Knight over the head. He took a step back and raised his swords up, motioning for Jhakor to stop. "You're a natural," he told him outright. "I don't know what the Gods sent you to us for? But you were made for this. You know what your problem is though, recruit?" Jhakor shook his head mutely, waiting for the Paladin to pass judgment. "When you fight, you expect rookie fighters to have patterns and follow rules. They're just flailing, you're planning ahead. Want to beat someone you can't read? Feint and strike, over and over. Then strike and feint. They don't have a pattern for you to read, so brutalize them with your skill and they won't get the chance to hit you. My old sergeant used to tell us again and again, if you don't know what someone's doing in a fight? Hit them in the face. Puts a stop to whatever shit they're up to real quick." Jhakor felt himself blush, but he nodded - he was surprised at himself. He had managed to land a real hit on the man teaching the others to fight, without even really meaning to! His pride was punctured quickly as he Knight added as he walked away, "And I won't underestimate you next time, either. No more free hits."

Still, he never had trouble on the training field again. Quickly they learned that fighting Jhakor relying on brute strength was a sure way to get thrashed, the first time he struck back at his opponent the poor boy nearly dropped his sword in surprise, entirely falling for the feint and taking a shot to the side. The fight was over almost as soon as it began, and as with all things,

there was an immediate scramble to overtake Jhakor as the best swordsman of the group. Forms and fighting styles bloomed overnight, practically, each knight-to-be's frantic efforts rewarded with leagues and leagues of progress. To himself, scratching his bruised head, the drillmaster muttered, "If only it was always so easy as getting hit in the head to teach the class how to fight.."

It was not all work however. During the night, once the light faded, they were free to do as they pleased (provided their work was all completed). Desperate to get out of the tower after working for so long during the day, the group again and again made excursions into the city, sitting up talking and drinking in bars until the early hours of the morning, crawling back to their bunks and only just managing to drag themselves out of their cots for the beginning of their next day of training. It was a low-sleep life, but I don't think there was any among them who didn't enjoy themselves. The life of a Paladin is not to simply train and drink, however; all too often there is real work to be done.

And so it was that they found themselves assembled in the early hours of a crisp fall morning, kitted in their freshly-polished armor, wearing their chosen weapons on their belt. A host of falcons circled overhead as the eight lined up, arranged in two lines of four, all with perfect posture. Jhakor's mentor stood at the head of the formation, considering each of them in turn. With no ceremony, he began to speak, "Today is the day that will be marked as the worst day of your time here. For most - perhaps all - today will mark the day of your first battle. Your first potential kill." Sombering further, he continued, "Your first loss of a friend. Perhaps your final day. We are not an order who idly sits by. In the days since we were founded, we have slain

innumerable foes.” Tone firming, attempting to rally the young aspirants, he continued, “We will slay innumerable more. Where evil treads, where the dead rise, it is WE who will extinguish it. That is our job, our sacred duty. Today marks your first day of assisting the knighthood in this duty. Today you set upon the path that will allow you to join us as a true knight. Follow orders, remember your training, and do not neglect your defense.” Then quietly, simply, he dismissed them, “Gods be with you.”

For their part, the eight did not react with fear or discouragement, simply the arrogance and pride only youth can bring, each aspiring knight’s face growing grimmer at the sentiment, but each trusting in their strength of arm and their allies. The four in the front were dispatched to one group, the second row went another way - Jhakor found himself in the former group, lead to one corner of the drill field. A young lady-knight introduced herself to the small squad as Lady Anah, explaining in a lovely melodic tone, “I’ll be leading you on the exercise today. I’m not one for idle chit-chat, so we’re going to get moving in just a moment. Stay in formation, keep your guard up and your falcons ready - we’re fighting bandits. They’ve been razing farmland near Pash, so we’re going to put a stop to it. Move out!” And, as ordered, the group fell in and marched forth from their guildhall, keeping tight formation while their falcons followed after. They met with the other half of the eight briefly, though none spoke - knowing all too well the rules of marching and decorum. In silence they made their way out of the city, their classmates breaking away to move westward towards the river while Jhakor and his squad moved north, headed for the farmlands. And, they hoped, a chance at glory.

Glory was not in short supply that day, but nor were bandits. Some score of them

descended upon the Paladins as they approached the ragged encampment in the hills, shoddy armor and poorly maintained weapons raised. Each of Jhakor's squad drew their weapons, and at Lady Anah's order, surged forward to meet their opponents. Forming a rough circle to hold off the small horde that sought to encircle them, they sent their falcons in, darting through the bandit ranks to score with claws and beaks before lashing out with spears, maces, and blades. Training carried the day. Jhakor's own blades flashed forward before he even realized what he was doing, neatly ending the life of an unfortunate bandit who had drawn too close with his guard too low. There was only a brief moment of startling realization for what he had done before the next came at him, then the next, kindly not giving him enough time to process each life extinguished by his blade before he was forced to defend himself against the next attacker. When it was all said and done, over in a brutal five or ten minutes, only Lady Anah had out-performed him, the dead numbering eight by her hand alone - indeed those that had been able to watch her had noted she fairly danced through their numbers, rapiers shredding feeble armor and bypassing parry with ease. Jhakor had managed a nauseating four, their corpses lying slashed to pieces and bleeding near his spot in the formation. Around him, his companions all stood in varying states of shock, save for Lady Anah - who was, by now, quite used to it. She turned towards her charges, pity in her eyes, and went to wipe down her blades. Taking their signs from her, each of the others did as well, wiping the blood and dirt carefully from their weapons, taking note of nicks and scratches that needed to be removed later to avoid wear-and-tear. Anah seemed to feel some speaking was needed, her troops remaining utterly silent, uncertain eyes remaining fixed on her as she spoke, "Taking a life is never easy. It is never to be done lightly. But life-takers sometimes have to have their lives taken. We protect, first and foremost, but sometimes the only way to defend is with a strong offense." Her eyes drifted to Jhakor during the last of her speech, indicating him - picking

him out in particular, “Some groups take pride, the first day going out. They choose the one who killed the most and heap praises on him. I’ve seen others do the opposite, shunning the one with the most and limping away.” Her lips pursed and she shook her head, gesturing for them to follow, “I hope you will do neither. Instead be glad none of you were injured, and that all survived. That is a precious rarity.”

It was only on the return trip that Jhakor began to lose his numbness, noticing for the first time the blood caking the front of his armor. Squinting skyward, he was able to pick out his beloved falcon, its beak and claws likewise stained crimson red from the battle. They paused outside of the city, not wishing to alarm anyone, and cleaned their equipment, washing metal and skin in the cool waters of the Pachacacha. Then each dutifully cleaned and checked their winged companions, ensuring the creatures were still healthy after the engagement. Their chores done, Lady Anah lead the somber party back to the city. Their march was without the spring in their steps that had accompanied the march out, instead a deathly silent procession as each struggled to cope, in their own way, with what they had done. It was necessary, they knew, but none - least of all Jhakor - could quite bring themselves fully to terms. The second group returned likewise, uninjured save for a few vicious claw marks, ‘gifts’ from the undead within the Caverns of Mor, whose ranks had been significantly thinned by the recent Paladin squad. Luminaries were dispatched to deal with both the bandit bodies, and the rotted corpses of the recently re-slain monsters of Mor, and the Paladins were once more arrayed in formation before the guildmaster.

Quietly pleased, he thanked them for their service and dismissed them - the rest of the week was theirs to recover. As a simple, final word of caution, he bade them recall this fight, and

that more would follow - the work of a Paladin is never done until all evil is removed. The eight fell out of formation and formed a distinctly miserable group that sulked towards the gate. A low whistle stopped them in their tracks and, as one, they turned to peer back - there stood Lady Anah and the knight who had lead the group second group, the grizzled Sir Elias. Lady Anah, far more outgoing than her counterpart (and also quite a bit better looking) was quick to offer - on both her and his account - "Tradition we take you for drinks. I know you all aren't happy, the first fight is always the worst. But, maybe this will help?" She flashed a small, admittedly uncertain smile that seemed to grow as most of the faces in the group brightened at the prospect of free alcohol, and the group of ten quickly made its way to a tavern, where they spent the night discussing very pointedly anything but the events of the day.

It was an especially eventful night for Jhakor, who found himself quite taken with Lady Anah. Clever, intelligent, and quite good looking, she was one of the youngest of the knights, and quite popular among the rest. Having fought along side her, Jhakor had a large amount of respect for the Lady, though he had not properly met her before - this night was the night to change all of that. From the start, she selected the seat beside his and engaged him in conversation almost immediately. They got along famously, she laughing at his jokes and teasing him lightly about his reputation and the knight he was assigned to, even going so far as to promise to teach him to fight with rapiers as she did, if he so desired. The rest of the eight seemed to almost fade into the background as the night grew onward, and Lady Anah's fascination with Jhakor left poor Sir Elias quite out of his depth - he settled on awkward, sullen silence, practically sulking at being left alone with the Squires (and forced to foot half of the bill, to boot).

All too soon, especially for both Lady Anah and Jhakor, it was time for them to return to the guildhall. The Squires to the barracks, Lady Anah and Sir Elias to their respective homes. They bade each other goodnight, the eight profusely (and with many a slurred word) thanking the knights for the drinks, and all set off in their respective directions, returning home.

The week off passed with little of note occurring, each taking time to deal with what they had done. Though all knew of the trials they would face, there is little one can do to prepare to take a life save practice, or so the Carnifex say, and these young men and women had none at all. It would be some time before any could broach the subject at all, some three days passed in near-silence before someone had the courage to speak up. In a rush, as if a floodgate had been opened, all told their story of the battle. The eldest of the eight took it upon himself to record these stories, which survived to this day and was made use of in the compilation of this tale. It is a true tragedy that it was lost to time some years ago, for it was a quite interesting read (though far less interesting than this) - but that is neither here nor there. The cathartic relief brought about by being able to speak to each other freely, and work through what occurred served only to bring the eight closer together still, now a proper family, ready to stand against the world.

It was precisely what they needed, as well - a family. The week off passed by, and again they were called upon. All eight, this time, sallied forth with Sir Elias leading them, and set about repelling a raid against the city. Jhakor and the others had never been under siege before, and the noise of meteors striking bodies or the ground, the clash of metal and other sounds of melee unnerved them - but they drew strength from the presence of others. "Remember," Elias

had told them, “Stick in formation. All too often, we lose people when they wander off. Fight as a group, bring down the big targets first, and listen to orders. It’ll be loud, noisy as Pit, and real messy, but remember what you learned!” Each drew their blades and followed, their knight-leader on horseback, each of them on foot. Nine falcons circled overhead as they made their way to the front, the crowd of worried onlookers who remained crouched on the streets near the battle parting immediately, respectfully giving them room to proceed. Elias glanced back at the others once they were in sight of the fighting, and slipped from his saddle. “No cavalry charge this time,” he muttered, sending his horse away to the stables. He drew his own preferred weapon, a massive, two-handed axe that had been custom-forged just for him. He gestured to the whirlwind of combat, picking out a massive, hulking Azudim vampire that was busily annihilating a small detachment of mages, and announced, “Him first.” He raised his axe overhead and gave a primal, wordless battle-cry and surged forward, all Eight on his heels, as they charged the vampire. His back to them, he was caught entirely off-guard as an axe smashed into his spine. Jhakor and another of the Eight, a small, skinny man who preferred shortswords were the next two to arrive, four blades lashing out in synch to hobble the target. As he fell, the rest practically swarmed over him, blades making short work, leaving nothing but a torn husk behind. Elias was already on to the next target, a rock-covered woman, flail smashing through waves of guards. “That one next!” he cried, not waiting to see if any followed, setting a manic pace to hack through the raiders.

They emerged, at the end of the day, entirely unhurt - the shining legion of plate-clad soldiers rushed into the midst of the enemy and shattered them in a mighty blow, necromancer and vampire falling before them in an efficient, brutal whirlwind of steel. Survivors of the battle described it as either a Godssend or an absurd oddity, depending on their views - it was an

unprecedented success for the small band, and one that served to spur their morale higher than ever before. They were declared heroes, the group of them - they became known throughout the city, and indeed most of the neighboring villages, as simply 'The Eight'. A steadfast core of heroes that outshone the darkness, they were held up as what every true Paladin should be. And in truth, their tales are wonderful in their own right, but are not to be told here - and so I shall skip over their many valorous accomplishments and simply direct the reader to the only other surviving member of The Eight, Sir Ta'lionu.

The knighting of the Eight was a grand affair, the heroes of the city drawing a huge crowd to see. Each was resplendent in their gear, arrayed in their usual four-wide, two-deep lineup before the guildmaster. The crowd cheered mightily as each was called forward to kneel, the ceremonial blade touching once, twice, against their shoulders, and then rose as the newest knight of the Paladins. Each were granted titles holding to their attributes most shown, the ever-dependable Sir Jhakor granted the title of 'the Steadfast' for his unwavering dedication to both defending the weak and the code of honor, boasting the most enemies slain per patrol of his group and a flawless conduct record. As he stood before guild and city, his thumbs moved to trail across the symbols still worn into the handles of his long swords - he knew he was doing his family proud and upholding their honor.

The aftermath of the knighting was a feast, paired with drinking and dance - a wild, heady sort of celebration. The Eight never ran out of drinks, and many of the knights were practically hauled off to the dance floor by admirers. The newly knighted Sir Jhakor likewise felt a hand grab his, tugging him towards the floor - though when he turned to see the person, it was

none other than Lady Anah. Face slightly flushed from drink, she laughed at his startled expression and informed him matter-of-factly that since his first fight had been with her, she was claiming his first dance too. They managed to dance for some time before a jealous admirer cut in, practically hauling him away - though this only seemed to amuse Lady Anah, who vanished into the crowd. Despite himself, through numerous dances with lovely ladies (and the occasional handsome man) who asked, he found himself smiling to himself about the first of his dances that day.

There is a time and place for feasts, and dance - but they will never last forever. The drink and food were consumed, the party-goers returned home, and peace returned to the guildhall. Some of The Eight yet remained, others having gone off with friends or admirers to continue the celebration - Sir Jhakor was one of those who elected to remain. As he stood on the railing overlooking the ballroom watching the cleaning crew, he let his mind wander - contemplating the oddity of his position. There would be younger aspirants looking up to him, and eventually a patrol of his own to lead. The prospect both excited and worried him - he was confident in his skills, and his training of course, but some doubt yet lingered. Shaking his head as if to clear it, he pushed up from the railings and turned to leave, but froze abruptly. From the corner of his eye he detected some movement, a strange feeling of being watched sweeping over him. His hands fell to his hips, resting on the handles of his swords, and in that moment the feeling halted abruptly, whatever presence he detected vanishing. He shook it off after a careful look around the decidedly deserted balcony, and made his way to sleep off the drink that he worried was addling his mind.

It was a strange feeling, being in the place that Lady Anah once was - here he was, about to take out his first group of Squires on patrol. She had teased him mercilessly the night before, while they were having drinks; it was not unusual for them to be seen there together, drinking and laughing and telling stories into the night, but tonight was different. Both had agreed there was a foul wind in the air, a steady darkness that seemed to pervade even the warm depths of the bar. And so their conversation ended shorter than it normally would have, before either was properly tipsy, let alone drunk, and they resolved to retire to their quarters. Lady Anah returning to her home, and Sir Jhakor made to go back to his recently-rented apartment. Just outside the bar however, he felt a light bump against his side in the darkness, then a pair of lips at his cheek. Lady Anah whispered quietly, "Be careful, bring them all back. And yourself as well." And with that, she was gone, leaving him in something of a state of shock. He did manage to recover himself as best one can given the situation and made his way back home, the streets and bar empty save for the rather amused bartender who saw the whole thing.

It was a longer patrol than he would have liked, and the weather was appalling. Sir Jhakor had briefed his squad - which numbered six in total - on the specifics of the mission. The terms were odd and nobody, himself included, much liked that. Sir Jhakor made no mention to his Squires, but there had been a strange man the guildmaster had not seen fit to introduce who was present during the briefing, positioned just so against a post so that none but Sir Jhakor could see him. The man wore an odd set of clothing, an oddly mottled set that made his form a difficult one to judge from a distance, fairly blending with the shadows. And, at the conclusion of the head knight's briefing, he had vanished entirely - abruptly - from view; and now, with every step, Sir Jhakor was quite certain he was being watched.

The specifics of his mission were not entirely complicated, simply strange in their design: there was a small cult operating in the Shamtota Hills who had kidnapped a child last night. They were to rescue the young girl, and were under explicit instructions to bring the leader of the cult back alive. And so they marched, fording the Pachacacha, and delved further into the Hills, blades drawn and entirely on edge. Not a word was spoken but all halted as one outside the cave, a small squire drawing forth a lit branch to serve as a torch. Jhakor wordlessly gestured towards the two men at the rear of the formation, then pointed to either side of the cave. The indicated Squires broke off and moved to stand guard near the entrance, establishing a vanguard for the main party as it went into the darkness.

It did not take long at all for them to find what they sought, the cave wound once left, then right, opening quickly into a wide, well-lit area. In blood, profane and vile runes were etched on the walls, floor, and even the ceiling, while wax candles burned brightly all around. Caught in the midst of a ritual, three cultists whirled on the intruding knights and rushed forward, brandishing knives. The fourth, a tall, skeletal man with sunken eyes simply watched, a small girl clutched to his chest with a blade at her throat. Jhakor immediately picked him out of the group as the one to be taken alive, tugging a club from his belt and beginning to circle around, leaving the Squires to dispatch the cultists. Not fighters, and far more suited to kidnapping children in the dead of night than doing battle with warriors, the three cultists were hacked down immediately, all the while Sir Jhakor circled.

Finally speaking, his voice croaky, the last surviving cultist jeered, "Strike me

down then, Paladin. Save the girl, if you can.” And with that taunt, he slashed his blade cleanly across the throat of his captive - or at least he tried to. No sooner had his arm begun to twitch than a man appeared behind him - Sir Jhakor belatedly picking him out as the man from the briefing - and thrust a dirk into his back two times. Like the life had gone out of him, the cultist crumpled to the ground, as did the girl, sobbing hysterically. Giving the unconscious man a kick, the mysterious stranger turned to fix Jhakor with an odd little smile, gave a cheeky wink, and jumped backwards just as abruptly as he had appeared. His body seemed to sink into something that none of the others could quite see, vanishing from view and leaving knight, Squires and girl alone in the cave once more.

Never one to disobey orders or be sidetracked, the Steadfast lived up to the name given to him at his knighting by entirely disregarding the stranger for the moment, resolving only to report his findings. Moving on with completing the mission - the prisoner was shackled and hauled along (none too gently) by the burliest of the Squires, another moved to carry the still-sobbing girl, and the party hastily retreated from the unnerving cave, collected their two guards, and made for home.

Returning home with his now-bloodied Squires arrayed in tight formation, they performed the customary stop by the river to clean up, Sir Jhakor mostly lost in thought, wondering about the girl's strange rescuer. The rest of the Squires, for their part, were far louder than any of The Eight had been during their first mission, squabbling and teasing each other, though any with a discerning ear would have noted the attempt to cover their shock and dismay with bravado. Still, it was with heads held high that they returned to the city, and Sir Jhakor's

heart practically melted at the sight of daughter and father reunited once more. He waved away the man's offer of further payment, refusing even a single sovereign for his work - and his Squires did likewise - though one Squire did not go unrewarded. Overcome, the poor young girl leapt forward and grabbed onto her savior, the one who had carried her all the way home from that cave, and clung on as tight as she could, refusing to be dislodged by her father until after a full minute had passed. With a final word of thanks, trying to hide his own tears from the Paladins, the man took his daughter in his arms and carried her home, leaving the Squires and Knight to return to their hall.

As was customary, the Squires were debriefed and given the rest of the week off, and Sir Jhakor promised to buy them drinks at the tavern, which of course livened them up somewhat. The group set off for the bar while Sir Jhakor lingered a few moments, pulling aside his mentor for a quiet word. "Sir, while we were out there, I noticed some strange things," he began. Before he could go further, the guildmaster raised a hand to silence him, "There are forces at work within the city that do not hold to the beliefs we do, Sir Jhakor. An ally is an ally - you were not at risk, though I am glad they proved useful. Do not concern yourself further," he replied, quite cryptically. Wrinkled face breaking into a less than typical smile, he suggested further, "Go and see to the Squires. Enjoy yourself for the night. I will see you soon, I am sure." And with that (along with a salute) the guildmaster turned on his heel, and hastily made his way to the office. Still faintly concerned, but not one to doubt his guildmaster (or turn away the prospect of a visit to the tavern), Sir Jhakor turned as well, moving to leave the guildhall.

The night was a pleasant one, birds singing later than normal as the light held. As

promised Sir Jhakor went to the tavern, enjoying drinks and teasing the Squires about anything but the job of the day. The other two squad leaders were there as well, two other members of The Eight, and their group joined with Sir Jhakor's took up most of the bar, where they laughed and joked and talked late into the night. Finally, at the barkeeper's reluctant insistence, they all packed up and made for home, the members of The Eight going for their apartments, the Squires back to the barracks. Thoroughly worn out, Sir Jhakor was looking forward to his bed a great deal, stumbling sleepily into his apartment.

Jhakor was permitted, with two weeks off, to return home to visit his family for the first time since leaving to become a Paladin. He set off immediately, taking almost no time at all to pack, finding himself beyond eager to see his parents and siblings once more. The trip was uneventful, the guild having gone so far as to allow him to take a carriage to make the trip to Ashtan. He hadn't told them he was coming, and so it was with quiet amusement that he found himself on the gorgeous steps to his family's home. Unable to hide a grin, he rapped thrice on the door, a servant opening it with habitual regality. "Welcome to the-" was as far as she made it before her eyes widened, "You're back! Jh-" Jhakor quickly covered the girl's mouth with his hand and shook his head, finger raised to his lips to shush her. "Want to surprise them, where are they?" he wondered, dropping his hand away again. "Gods above, I almost didn't recognize you!" the girl whispered, "Clad in all that armor. You look like you were born to do it! Here, they're just taking their lunch. I'll play it up for you, try to clank quietly!" She grabbed his hand, closed the door behind him, and tugged him along, gesturing for another to go and collect his belongings from the coach and take them to his room.

It felt good to be home, and he relished the feel of the familiar halls, the servants all grinning faintly at him as he made his way past, holding up a finger to shush them, quite intent on surprising his parents. She left him just outside the dining room and stepped inside, announcing in her most professional voice, "I apologize for the intrusion, but there's a gentleman here to see you. He claimed there was something wrong with some swords you gave him, and he's quite irate. He wouldn't take no for an answer, and he looked very important. I hope it is quite alright that I let him in...?" He could hear his father's grumpy reply, but no words - whatever he said, it must have been an agreement to see him, for the doors opened up. Jhakor stepped inside, playing along despite himself as he tugged free the two family-crested long swords at his sides, "I mean look at these," he chided, "You've no idea how much I have to polish them to keep them looking this good!" There was a clatter of cutlery hitting the plate as his parents, older brother and younger sister looked up in shock. His mother was the first to move, a very happy shout of, "Jhakor!" practically echoing around the dining hall before she was on the go. He had to slide his weapons away to avoid stabbing her, just in time - she wrapped him up in a massive hug, pecking his cheek and asking a dozen questions at once, what he was doing there, how long he was staying, if everything was okay, if he had gotten a girl pregnant(?), if they had kicked him out, if...She was cut off by her husband, who approached and clapped Jhakor on the shoulder, "Let the poor boy answer one question before you ask another! ...Welcome home, son. Glad to see you're well, would you like something to eat?"

Knights are notorious for never turning down a free meal, and the food he was accustomed to was nowhere near of the quality of what he knew was normally eaten here. He immediately agreed and apologized as he settled down in his armor, though the apologies were

waved away. “We’ll have your room ready for you,” promised the servant girl as she slipped back out into the hall, leaving the family to eat and catch up with Jhakor.

Lunch went a full hour longer than it had been planned to, with Jhakor telling stories and laughing with his family. He hadn’t realized how much he missed home until he was here, with them, comfortable once more. His little sister had grown a great deal since he had last seen her, proudly informing him she had been accepted to a prep school of sorts, for being a bard. She was a few years younger than Jhakor, while his older brother had a year and a half on him, their ages ensuring they had been both best of friends and worst of enemies for the duration of their time growing up together. His older brother was in awe of the stories he told, though Jhakor felt oddly self-conscious about talking of fighting with his mother around especially, so he kept things as clean as he could. Mostly, he focused on how the schooling had been and praised the swords he wore again and again; they were truly his most prized possession and the others of his guild had been quite impressed with the look and balance of them. The Eight joked that he slept with them under his pillow at night - a rumor that may or may not have been true.

The rest of the week, he spent practically basking in luxury. His father was busy with work but still found the time to talk to him. His sister was utterly enamored with his falcon, which of course he brought with him - the bird likely gained ten pounds by the end of the visit from all of the treats she was given. Pampered and showered in attention as both knight and bird were, it’s hard to say who was more upset to have to finally leave at the end of the week. Again there were teary goodbyes said, hugs all around, and Jhakor found himself riding back in his carriage with his bird, much relaxed - though already starting to miss home as Ashtan faded into

the distance.

It was not always a good idea to travel by carriage, especially in these times. Money was scarce for many, and they resorted to less-than-legal methods for keeping themselves fed. Jhakor was jostled awake by the carriage rolling to a stop abruptly, in the midst of the woods. “Ah, Sir?” he heard the driver call. “There are some...gentlemen to see you.” Jhakor blinked, surprised, and slipped from the carriage. On a whim, he set his falcon free as he went, the bird launching itself skyward through the opened door, protectively beginning to circle overhead. His training had not been wasted; even as he stepped from the carriage, he was already sizing up the area and the men arrayed against him. The clearing was not far from the road - he could actually see the logs cleverly placed across it to divert carriages around this makeshift pass. In fact, the same trees that were cut here to make the path had likewise been used to build the barricade. His eyes cut to the group ahead - numbering five strong, they had a mishmash of equipment - rusty axes, a few clubs, a large troll in the back clutching two ragged-looking shortwords. “Can I help you?” Jhakor asked, politely as he could while his hands rested on the hilts of his sword. The one out front, a rough-looking Grook (not many of those...), spoke up for the rest, “Well, you see- figure we hacked out this real nice path for you to use since there were some treefalls on the main road. We were just hoping you might tip us, maybe. We’re real hungry, sir.” Of course, despite his polite plea, the still bloody bardiche resting over his shoulder indicated he was not, in fact, a wayward woodcutter. A voice to Jhakor’s right briefly drew his attention - the carriage driver spoke quietly, “If you pay, they let you pass. Honor among thieves, I suppose...” Feeling perhaps it was no longer his place to speak, he quieted once more, hunkering down in his seat. Jhakor nodded to him and wondered towards the ‘woodsmen’, “And what would be a suitable tip for such work? A

few gold each, perhaps?” Honestly, they seemed surprised asking nicely had worked. The troll in the back sniggered to himself, but all kept quiet for a moment. Then, trying to press his luck, the Grook tried for, “How about whatever you’ve got in that carriage? Then you can go on your way without having to haul all that heavy shi- stuff with you. Everyone wins.”

It was clear that the men were going to take whatever they could get, despite Jhakor looking ready for war - desperate men do desperate things in desperate times. Actually sounding truly apologetic, Jhakor shook his head at them. “Afraid you won’t get anything from me. I need to return to my work, and you are in my way. So, thank you for cutting down the trees. Perhaps play with the resulting logs somewhere not on the highway and no one will need to use your trail.” Again a quiet ripple of laughter snuck through the bandits, though this laughter was aimed more towards the Grook. Seeming unwilling to lose any more face, he decisively gestured his bardiche at Jhakor, “Gut him,” he sneered, tired of playing nice. In a flash, Jhakor’s blades were freed, his falcon shrieking loudly overhead as it too readied for a fight- there was no backing down any more, for either side. Bravely, the carriage driver slipped down to cower behind it, well out of the line of fire.

The first to reach him was the Grook, who bounded ahead of his companions, bardiche whistling through the air at Jhakor’s head. Jhakor read the blow in an instant, giving him plenty of time to sway back, sword swatting at the haft as it passed to make sure it wasn’t a feint. By then, the other bandits had started to creep around, trying to flank him. Under his breath, he whispered a prayer to the Gods, a white aura billowing around him. Piously, he declared that he would stand on his faith - a circle surrounding the combatants. Startled, one tried to back away

only to bump into some invisible obstacle. Five locked inside with one, they set their jaws and returned to trying to hack Jhakor to bits. The Grook swung again, though this time Jhakor was more than ready for the broad sweep of the bardiche - by binding them into the circle, he made sure there wasn't room to swing such an ungainly weapon safely. The blade passed harmlessly over Jhakor's head as he dropped to a knee, armor clanging loudly against the packed dirt of the forest, and his longswords shot forward. Even as they punctured the belly of the Grook, his last swing collided forcefully with the man to his right's face, gashing deeply into his nose and sending him reeling back a half-step. Twisting his blades, Jhakor jerked them free of the dying Grook and barrelled into the man with the cut nose, bardiche caught between them. Both it and man went flying from the force of the blow, the bardiche skittering outside the circle while the man with the bloody nose hit the invisible wall of piety behind him. He was unable to penetrate it, but Jhakor's blades did as they easily slid through his body. Two dead to immediate impalement, the remaining three looked far less confident than they did a moment ago. Each settled back as far as they could away from the knight, their weapons still raised.

The next to choose to fight was a shrewd-looking mhun, who clutched a hatchet in his left hand. Jhakor speculated privately that this was the man who did most of the de-foresting, judging by the poor shape the weapon was in. Still, ragged weapon aside, this man had been quietly watching Jhakor's fighting style. He feinted a head-strike, baiting Jhakor's parry-and-impale combo, his left hand extending out palm-up to meet Jhakor's stab. Shockingly, instead of sinking deep into flesh, the blade buried itself there with a hefty 'thunk' and refused to move any further. His surprise made him lose his guard for a moment, having just enough time to realize the arm was, in fact, a false one before the next strike caught him flatly across the head. Had the

axe not been dull, it might very well have punctured his helmet and slain him - as it was, the blow sent him reeling to the side, struggling to catch his bearings. Bold now, the second of the three stepped up and brought his club crashing into Jhakor's groin, low blow aiming to drop the armor-clad warrior to the ground. It was a near thing, Jhakor felt his legs start to buckle, but he rallied himself and straightened once more. An apparent opportunist, the troll with the shortswords charged in now, starting a hack for Jhakor as he flanked - this, at least, Jhakor was ready for. He dropped a longsword, grabbed the man with the club, and shoved him into the troll's path. Instead of letting his momentum slay his ally, the troll twisted and off-balanced himself, bumping harmlessly into the thrown man. Behind Jhakor, his falcon swooped down and gouged deeply into the eyes of the mhun that was just about to deliver a coup-de-gras to the back of his head. Helpless, blinded and howling, Jhakor used the man's screams to twist and take his revenge, lone longsword severing his remaining hand and laying the mhun's throat open. Eyeless sockets widening in shock, he toppled over, the third casualty. Jhakor raised his longsword now to deal with the two remaining: the club-wielder and the troll.

Jhakor's bird made the choice for him, lunging down towards the man with the club. Talons extended, it committed too fully to the dive and a stroke of the crude weapon caught it mid-air, sending her skittering down to the ground just outside of the circle. Fearing for his companion, enraged, Jhakor lashed out at her attacker, blade punching in against his club again and again. Knowing far better than to get between a furious Paladin and his target, the troll with shortswords wisely lurked back close to the circle that entrapped him, watching as Jhakor vented his rage on first the man's club. And then, when the club was splintered and broken, unable to guard any longer, on the man's face, head and shoulders. Pulped just as finely as his club, the

man was certainly no longer among the living once Jhakor was done with him. And then it fell to the final man - the troll with the swords.

Longsword was raised, two shortswords lifted in response. The troll finally spoke, drawling in what was either an atrocious accent or an utterly lazy enunciation, “Y’ ain’t got t’ fight me ‘f y’ don’t want. Told’m t’ leave y’ be.” Still worried - enraged - about his bird, Jhakor just growled back and lunged in with his sword. The troll accepted his attack with a gracious nod before parrying it, a much more restrained fighter than the others had been. “Unnerstand y’ take it personal. Even ‘f it ain’t. Y’ bird did move some. Hopin’ th’ thing feels better- was a real mean strike.” Again Jhakor ignored his attempt at banter, or parley, or whatever it was, and slashed towards the troll. Blocking again, the man seemed to grow abruptly tired of talking as well, “Fine. Y’ ain’t goin’ t’ talk polite-like, ‘ll deal with y’.” His swords lowered, and he began to do something strange with them. Weaving them in steady figure-eights, he crouched low and leaned back slightly. Jhakor had no clue what he was doing, watching for a half-moment before some sage advice came to him, “Hit them in the head if you don’t know what they’re doing”. And so, he lashed out with his single-remaining sword; that was his mistake. The troll seemed to have attended the same lesson as he had, purposefully baiting the head-strike. Left-handed shortsword swept up and effortlessly cleared Jhakor’s sword, the troll’s massive brow snapping forward in a vicious headbutt that dented Jhakor’s helm and knocked askew the troll’s hat. Jhakor was utterly floored by the blow, longsword clattering away, circle vanishing as his concentration dropped, lying flat on the ground. Groaning, he felt a small fire in his side, glancing to see his armor rent along his left side in a jagged line. He swept his eyes up to the troll, unable to react fast enough to do anything at all. But instead of finishing him off, the troll slid his swords away and tugged

on his hat towards the fallen knight, adjusting his attire. “Real nice. Thank y’ for th’ promotion. ‘n nice fight too - watch that temper, though.” With that and a cheery wink, the troll wandered lazily off into the forest, stopping only long enough to scoop up the bardiche from the dirt.

Jhakor saw a hand jut out towards him while he lay on the ground, aching all over and recovering - the driver had roused himself from his hiding spot to help the poor knight up. Gratefully, Jhakor accepted the help, murmuring a quiet, “Thank you,” to the absurdly embarrassed-looking driver, ignoring his countless apologies as he moved to scoop up his falcon. Her wing seemed broke, but she fluttered her good one at him as he lifted her out of the dirt, giving a weak call of greeting. Jhakor had been trained, as were all the rest, in how to care for a wounded falcon - so he did what he could for her, moving to settle back into the carriage after collecting his swords. The bodies were left where they fell, the driver carefully steering the carriage past them before setting off quicker than normal, making its way towards Enorian once more. Jhakor’s entire attention was wrapped up on his falcon, stroking her head soothingly, trying to keep her still when she attempted to shuffle upright to show her master she was okay. Affectionately, she pecked his hand a few times before settling down to sleep, broken wing awkwardly bound in against her body. For the rest of the day it took to ride to Enorian, she lay in his lap instead of in her cage, Jhakor keeping her close by. She had saved his life, he knew, and gotten hurt for it - he cared for that little bird so much it hurt already, and now the feeling had doubled with her brilliant display of loyalty.

When he arrived back at the Paladin hall, his carriage driver waved off all thoughts of payment, and even carried his equipment and bags inside for him. Jhakor had an apartment, as

did most of the other knights, but his first priority was to have his falcon cared for, and so the gate-keeper kept close watch over his belongings while he was inside. He waved away physicians and other knights, all of whom were concerned with his slight limp and bloodied side, first shoving past all of them and taking his beloved bird to the falconer. A brief inspection indicated that, yes, the wing was broken and that she would be out of commission for awhile. But she would survive, fly again, and be as strong as ever soon. Jhakor was so relieved he might have hugged the man, but he refrained. He was then forcibly retired to the infirmary, where his injuries were briefly looked over. The gash on his skull and unfortunately-placed bruise were deemed superficial, as was the scratch on his side. “You were lucky,” he mentor’s disapproving voice boomed from the doorway. “Reckless, headstrong, liable to get yourself and everyone around you killed.” The old man fixed him with a scowl, shaking his head as he continued, “Remind me far too much of myself to be safe. Remember that, Jhakor.” Grimacing, embarrassed at being berated, Jhakor nodded. “Sorry, Sir,” he mumbled. “Did kill four of them. Fifth headbutted me and ran off - watch him. He’s not bad at all.” The older man shook his head, “You’ve got other work to do, once you’re healed. Your group is scheduled to go on patrol next week, don’t forget. I hope you heal fast- and as your punishment for letting yourself get hit, you’re going to take Anah out for dinner. She hasn’t shut up about you since you left.” And with that, he swept back into the hallway and vanished, off to do guildmaster-y things.

He resolved to deal with his ‘punishment’ as soon as possible. So, despite the apothacary’s passive-aggressive protest (which was quite a sight, reportedly: “Oh yes, don’t listen to me. I’m not trained for this. I’ve never seen someone as big or burly or strong as you before, Sir. You can ignore my advice - I’m the one who doesn’t know anything. Heroes never

die to something so silly as a deep-set infection!), he rose to his feet and slipped out, going to track her down. He didn't have to look very hard, she was in the training yard sparring two Squires. He grinned a bit and leaned against the wall, enjoying the show. The first was using an axe and shield, the second a shortsword/longsword combination. And she was thoroughly thrashing both of them. Each had been driven back to the far wall by her strikes - she kept a steady pattern of lunging in to herd one back, then twisting towards the other, each of her rapiers lashing out faster than the Squires could keep up with. One crouched behind his shield, the other parrying whatever he could, they looked to be having a rough time of it - but Anah was laughing, clearly enjoying herself. With a small grin of his own, Jhakor snagged two padded longswords from the rack and hopped the fence, creeping up as quietly as he could manage. Then, just before he struck, he gave a low whistle to attract her attention. The Squires took advantage of the distraction and hopped out of the ring, going to put their gear up and escape before the Lady noticed they were gone. Anah spun about at the whistle, immediately parrying his high slash at the head and going to counter at the chest, which he batted aside. And then she saw who was fighting her. "Jhakor!" she cried, rapiers dropping as she surged into him. Caught off guard, he was wrapped up in a warm hug, giving a faint groan as her arm banged against his cut side. "Oh! Are you hurt? What happened?!" From happy to concerned faster than he could blink, Anah was prodding at his side and berating him, "I let you out of my sight for a week and you crawl back half dead! What did you do?" He grabbed her hand to keep it from poking his bandaged side, twisting away and gave a faint laugh, head shaking, "Got attacked by bandits. C'mon, boss-man says I have to take you out to eat as punishment." She grinned and twisted her hand so his arm ended linked with hers, forcing him to escort her out of the tower - "Punishment, hm? Have to pretend you don't like buying me all the steak I can eat. Hope you saved your pay!"

She didn't end up having steak. Instead, the pair found themselves seated across from one another at a bar by the beach, having seafood and ale. He did the best to explain what had happened on the way back, with Anah alternately wincing sympathetically and mercilessly teasing him for managing to get hit. "Well, fond as I am of you, I'm not going to kiss THAT better," she quipped when he mentioned the unfortunate placement of the club-strike. He gave her a light kick under the table and rolled his eyes at her, but on the inside he found himself wondering just exactly how much she did like him. There was a certain uncertainty he held around women; despite all of the very obvious signs she was giving him, he was afraid of misreading and ruining what was a beyond comfortable friendship. He adored her, and she fit him well; they were already infamous as partners-in-crime among the others of the guild. Where was one, it was reasoned, the other was lurking somewhere close by.

Late into the night, they occupied their table, drinking and talking and plotting and generally enjoying one another's company. The owner was the only one left besides them when they finally paid their tab and left, each a little tipsy. Arm-in-arm, the pair wandered down the streets of the city until early in the morning, still talking quietly between themselves. Finally, Anah caved and admitted she needed to go sleep, reluctantly plucking her arm from Jhakor's. She gave him a smile and gestured down a nearby road - in his distraction with talking to her, he hadn't even noticed her walking him more or less home. "Your turn next time to walk me home," she told him with a smile, stepping in to hug him tightly. He returned the hug and immediately agreed, keeping in close for a moment longer than necessary. He pulled back and gave a small smile and ducked his head politely, murmuring quietly, "See you soon, Anah," and turning to

trudge the short walk back to his apartment. Still pleasantly buzzed, content as could be, he flopped down into his bed and fell asleep.

So content and warm in his bed was he that he was nearly late for the morning assembly. Sunlight shining in his eyes, head still pounding a bit from the night before, he rolled over with a groan, swapped his uniform for a clean one, and stumbled out on his way. He moved quickly, unwilling to be late for the first time ever, and narrowly made it inside the gate as the call was made for the Squires to assemble. A panting Jhakor straggled his way up to the front of the formation, settling in beside his guildmaster and mentor. Flanking the man on the other side was Lady Anah, seeming just as tired as he was - but at least she wasn't almost late. Giving him a quick grin behind the old man's back, she flashed a wink then turned her attention to the crop of Squires. "Today," the guildmaster began, droning on with his briefing. Jhakor knew the specifics of the mission already, they were always briefed beforehand, and actually ended up falling asleep on his feet.

He woke when the guildmaster said his name, apparently having been doing a convincing job of looking attentive instead of unconscious, and he straightened and saluted. Dully, he went over the details of the assignment. 'Nest of necromancers, kill them all for the Light, save the day'. His headache made it hard to be an idealist, or to have any particular notion of looking heroic - mostly he wanted to survive the fight, come home, and not throw up on anyone. His squires and he were dispatched to Jaru, where they met up with the man who was to be their guide. He had been attacked a few days ago by a skeleton, narrowly escaping with his life - the poor gentleman limped fiercely as he went along, his leg still hurting him. They went back along

a trail that twisted and turned, far removed from civilization. “Was looking for a lost goat out here,” he explained, “Then fell. Right down that hole - that’s where they are.” He pointed to a small, roughly man-sized gap in the ground. “When you go down, they’re left. Way out’s to the right. I’m..going home, I think.” Clearly in a hurry to get away, the grizzled herder hobbled around a bend and out of sight. “Right,” Jhakor ordered, “Rope. I go down first, rest of you follow quickly. Two stay for guard - you’re advanced enough to know who should stay. Figure it out, two minutes.” The group needed less than that, mercifully self-sufficient. Two peeled off immediately, tossing down a rope for Jhakor to slide down. Moving carefully so as to not hurt his side or head further, he slid down the rope into the darkness. One of the Squires helpfully tossed a lit torch after him, then one after another the remainder of his squad dropped down behind him save for the two vanguards. They found Jhakor already engaged in a fight with a vicious hellhound, the beast’s three heads snapping at him, trying to bypass his swords. The first Squire to land assisted with putting the beast down, severing a head with a single swing and giving Jhakor the room to slay the body of the beast with a thrust. Nodding, they formed up quietly on him and started forward, every other Squire drawing forth a torch. Jhakor thanked his lucky stars he got the good group- the one Lady Anah was with was bumbling and puppyish, likely to trip into a fight as walk into it. So they progressed through the dank, dripping cave, the shrouding darkness seeming to resist their efforts to displace it with light. “You shouldn’t be here,” a voice called from just beyond the torchlight. Stepping forth, Jhakor found the ‘skeleton’ they had been sent to dispatch. The old man had, unfortunately, been wrong - it was no necromancer. He recognized immediately, as did a good half of his soldiers, the little gremlin perched upon his shoulder. A chaos-wielder was doubly dangerous as a necromancer; they had been preparing for necromancy only - not domination or numerology. He flung his arms wide, a booming laugh echoing through

the caverns, and his entities flung themselves in against the Paladins. Each drew their blades and retaliated, though the lightning storm called forth managed to knock a few down. The brutal first rush was offset by Jhakor's quick thinking. Instead of resorting to steel, he dropped to a knee and began to pray, quietly at first, then at an increasing intensity. The Rite of Banishment was performed and the man's entities began to fade away one by one. His face fell as he watched his orb, gremlin and chaos storm disappear in a flash, then lunged in towards a nearby Squire. The attack was mental, striking deeply at his psyche. Tears welling in his eyes, he slumped to his knees before the gesture was repeated, now a furious light shining in his eyes. With a cry, he rose to his feet and flung himself bodily at the nearby crone, tackling her out of the way of the banishment circle, assaulting her fruitlessly with fists and feet. Jhakor called, "See to yourselves. I've got him!" True to his word, Jhakor's blades were drawn and he hacked away, and though his blades pierced the man's body he didn't slump. "My mind is still strong," he hissed, a blast of psychic energy storming from his eyes into Jhakor's form. He felt his muscles start to twitch, jerking back from the source instinctively. No longer pinned by blades, the cabalist waved a hand and started to chant under his breath. A nearby Squire called out, "Wait! Sir Jhakor, that's our guide!" and attempted to lunge in to haul the knight away from the cabalist, but his comrades were faster, pinning him down in a pile. Two of his charges now disabled, Jhakor slashed out furiously, blades a flurry as he tried to draw the man's attention towards himself once more. Nearly being stabbed has a wonderful way of altering your priorities, and once more the cabalist found himself trying to fend off Jhakor's attack. The frail-bodied mage was not much good in a fight without his entities, but his body had the damnable regeneration of a troll. Jhakor slashed again and again, but each time his body simply mended itself- though in excruciating pain, the cabalist somehow managed to regenerate each time a blade slashed through him. He likely would

still be there, hacking away at the man, had a Squire not risen to his feet and crept up carefully beside the Cabalist. Club in hand, he thwacked him brutally hard over the head, rendering the enemy unconscious in a single swipe. Sheepish, the shy Squire actually apologized, “Sorry Sir. He said his mind was strong, still. So I..” He trailed off to mumbling but Jhakor shook his head, “No, good thinking,” he returned, actually surprised. “Just-” Cut off by the groaning of the Cabalist starting to stir, he turned to face him once more. Seeing the hand start to draw in the dirt, his longsword arced down furiously and buried itself through the body a final time - this was, it seemed, enough to slay him. Unfinished on the floor beside the corpse was a single symbol, which Jhakor recognized after a moment from his brief overview of numerology: Rafic. “No. Good job, Squire. Get the others, let’s go.”

Jhakor not in any mood to waste time on cleaning up the mess, and there was nobody else in the small cave. What he had been doing there was unclear, indecipherable runes littered the place. The Squire afflicted with hatred had managed to, somehow, pulp the crone after all, and only then did he calm down enough to be lifted up by his companions. The other, who had been fooled to thinking the Cabalist was actually the guide had lost the effect as soon as the Cabalist was struck down, and now awkwardly stood at the end of the group when they formed up to go, too proud to apologize but quite embarrassed all the same. Leading his rag-tag group, only a few scratches to go around, the still hung-over knight trailed back to collect the vanguards. Cursing the sun and its damnable brightness, he limped back to the city of Enorian, Squires snickering faintly behind him as they marched. Grateful that this wasn’t their first outing, he was free of his obligation to take them for drinks and so he didn’t. Instead, he saluted, reported to the guildmaster, dismissed his charges, and crawled away to the Knight lounge.

His nap was interrupted by none other than Sir Elias, who thudded down heavily beside him on the couch he was knocked out on. "Drink this," he said with his normal business-like tone. What he passed Jhakor could pass for a drink, to a man dying of thirst. It tasted chalky and foul, but Elias wasn't the type to bullshit or prank, so he downed it anyway. The effect was almost - miraculously - immediate. Hangover retreating rapidly, Jhakor groaned a pleased sort of groan and slumped into the couch, hand coming to rest on his battered head. "Head injury and alcohol goes together like salt and lemons go with a cut," Elias advised, arms folding over his chest. "We're going to talk." Jhakor blinked and forced himself to straighten up, "Right, of course. Er, what can I do for you?" Simply, bluntly, Elias told him, "Anah likes you. A great deal. And you have a stupid habit of nearly dying lately. If you hurt her, I'll kill you. And if you die, I'll take up necromancy to hurt you. Think we're clear, yes?" Jhakor scooted slightly to one side, peering side-long at Elias, studying the man for a time, "I didn't know you two were close," he admitted, choosing his words with care. "Yes, well. My sister has her endearing qualities," Elias returned, abruptly rising to his feet and starting off, "Goldenseal, water and kelp," he added abruptly. "That's the drink that cures hangovers." Watching Elias go, Jhakor couldn't even think of a retort: for one, Anah liked him. That being confirmed finally gave him at least some idea of where he stood, and he was happy. For another, his head no longer was trying to kill the rest of him, and that was glorious too. And finally, he hadn't had a clue that Elias and Anah were related. The drink had fixed his hangover, but it hadn't done a thing for him being exhausted and so, rather than deal with all of this new information, he elected instead to fall asleep.

It is rather fortunate that he choose there to sleep there instead of his apartment. Not from

a sleep standpoint, but rather one of necessity; a mere hour after he fell asleep, he was rudely awoken again. This time it was Anah, calling, “Jhakor! Off your ass and on your feet, it’s time to go! Thrim!” He blinked a few times and stared up at her, “Huh?” was all he could manage. She impatiently grabbed his arm and jerked him roughly to his feet, “Thrim,” she repeated emphatically. “Some twit set Thrim loose in Jaru. We need to go. NOW, Jhakor!” He hadn’t seen her so worried before, which of course worried him too - immediately, he nodded, “Explain as we go! I’m ready,” he told Anah, following after as she half drug him down the stairs to the assembly hall. There were the rest of the Eight, along with Sir Elias and a few other knights. “Knights only,” Anah explained, “Too dangerous for Squires. We’re marching there, give them some hope. But we need to go fast!” The guildmaster was nowhere in sight, and Elias seemed to be running the show this time. Jhakor took up a spot at the end of the column, and Elias gave a curt nod, the group marching off. Anah formed up on his left and passed him a cohosh root. “Chew that,” she whispered over, “Keep you from falling asleep.” He dubiously eyed it, but nodded and stuck it in his mouth (really a trusting fellow). True to her word, the thought of sleep was abruptly banished from his mind as the group clanked its way out of the western gate of the city. Almost immediately they encountered their first fleeing villager, who stopped short as she saw them. “Hurry, please,” she begged of the knights, urging them onward. Anah started to speak lowly, explaining to Jhakor, “Thrim are parasites. Attach to your head, try to control you. They hate fire. Hope you have your torches?” Jhakor shifted slightly, revealing a few strapped to his back by way of answering. With a nod and a shifty glance, Anah swiped one of them, “Good. I forgot mine. No weapons, just fire - they hate fire.” The group halted and Elias surveyed the scene - a few bodies littered the ground with no visible wounds, simply crumpled where they fell, while more still were covered in markings, visibly beaten or crushed to death. Anah’s face

tightened and she admitted, "They make you kill, sometimes..." That was enough for Jhakor to decidedly take a disliking to them that rivaled Anah's own. Elias announced, "Pairs. Jhakor and Anah, obviously. I'm staying here, to guard the fire-wall. If you get in trouble, bring people back here. Scorched clothes and some light burns are better than Thrimmed." With that, he gestured and a massive blaze overtook the gap between the houses leading from Jaru. "Establish a perimeter," he added in a curt snap, "Burn them out. Save lives. Why are you still standing here listening to me talk?" Each of the Eight paired up and split off, one likewise remaining with Elias as a 'just-in-case' measure. Anah and Jhakor started to search house-by-house while the others moved ahead down the road, another group checking the houses across the street from Jhakor and Anah. The worst thing in a Thrim invasion, Anah explained, was to let them get behind you. The first house on their side of the street was clear, empty and clean. The second had even Anah gagging - a disemboweled corpse lay spread across the table, eyes clawed from its head. That aside, there was no indication within the house anything was wrong. Downstairs was neat and tidy, chairs neatly arranged around a small fireplace. The building was not a large one, a simple family presumably living there. Everything was in order except for the corpse, not even the door disturbed. Shaking his head, Jhakor took careful hold of Anah's shoulder and pulled her away from the sight, closing the door behind him to prevent anything from sneaking inside. "C'mon," he told her softly. "Keep going. Deal with it after, right?"

He had managed to pull her from the house, but convincing her to wait outside of the next one was impossible. So, he let her stubbornly shove him aside. The group across the street had found a thrim in the last house, so they lit their torches. Anah glanced to Jhakor to make sure he was ready, then nodded and kicked the door open wide. Each flinched back and raised their

torches as absolutely nothing happened. Heaving simultaneous sighs, each slumped down in faint relief before a cat darted free from the house, scurrying off to who knows where. The sudden movement left Jhakor yelping and almost falling over backwards, and Anah dropping a string of profanity that would make every sailor in the harbor blush. She cleared her throat once she was composed, apologetically glancing to Jhakor. They stepped inside and, as the first house, this one was clear. A single open room, the lone owner had apparently escaped when things started, dinner still resting on the table, half-eaten. With a nod, Jhakor and Anah stepped back outside and closed the door, marked it and barricaded it as best they could. The gap between the next house is the first sight Jhakor caught of a Thrim. The tentacled little beast had been hiding in the bushes, seizing the chance to take control of a host. It surged forward, puncturing through Jhakor's helm and fixing itself to his head. For a moment, he felt shock and tried to raise his torch to free himself but he was soon locked down, unable to resist at all. An alien presence in his mind took stock of everything with a practiced move, analyzing him perfectly, and he turned on Anah, much to his horror. Her eyes were very wide, torch raised up like a rapier as she settled into a combative stance. To Jhakor, the torch was the foulest thing he could imagine at that moment, its heat burning his eyes and searing his skin even from the distance away it was. He could practically smell himself starting to cook. Anah didn't know she was hurting him, she couldn't; he just knew he had to get that torch away and then he and Anah could leave this hell-hole and retreat home. Before he could even begin to argue with himself, his own torch surged forward, attempting to disarm Anah with a broad stroke. Her lips pursed, torn with brief indecision. And then, as Jhakor swung again, Anah told him matter-of-factly, "I like you, Jhakor. This isn't personal!" shortly before nailing him with a boot in his already bruised 'inner thigh'. Not even the Thrim could warp that feeling, and his body buckled. Anah brained him over the

head with her lit torch, burning the Thrim to pieces seemingly with only that brief touch. Jhakor yelled as the Thrim squealed, but its hold was broken as its body was crisped, and everything faded. Except for the throbbing between his legs, which took more than a few moments to go away. “Sorry Jhakor,” Anah said lightly, hauling him to his unsteady feet. (I believe the phrase he later used to describe it was to the effect of, “World-shattering, monk-quality kick,” that left his “knees weak, eyes watering and soul screaming”.) He took a moment (or more, if we’re being honest) to compose himself before nodding to Anah, not quite trusting himself to talk in anything other than a falsetto at the moment. The pair continued, Anah giggling faintly and Jhakor limping decisively. The next house was also empty, cleared quickly and locked. Giving a VERY wide berth to the brambles between the two houses this time, they glanced briefly over them and then went on to the next house. Between the two, there were no more close calls, though they did slay three additional Thrim. Jhakor devised (inspired as only a man can be, after his first encounter) a method of guard - by holding a torch near his head, Thrim either didn’t jump on you or were burned. The next they encountered fell to the first tactic, launching from above, its ambush spot being the roof of the house the pair were investigating. Too late it noticed the torch it landed on, oily skin bursting into flames as Jhakor flinched, letting the creature slide off to roast on the ground. Instinctively, he flinched again, this time away from Anah, who had jokingly drawn back her foot for a pre-emptive kick. “I’ll kill you,” he managed to rasp at her, sounding like he half-meant it, but Anah only laughed again and asked in an obnoxiously squeaky voice, “You’ll kill me?” She bumped his shoulder affectionately and they started on down the road once more.

The next two Thrim went to Anah, leaving them tied for the day on kills; turning a corner to start down to check the dock, they found a pair of two Thrimmed people dully exchanging

punches. Both were battered to an extreme degree, nearly dead from exhaustion and repeated strikes to the face. Neither were blocking, simply the thud-thud-thud of rhythmically exchanged punches, as if the Thrim were playing a sick game to see whose host would die first. Jhakor rushed in to break them up and, as one, they turned to sucker-punch the Knight. His day was not entirely horrible however, and he managed to sway to the side of the punches. Before they could go to swing again (though both wound up to do so), Anah swiped her torch across from behind, igniting both Thrim at once. The two citizens, once de-thrimmed, immediately collapsed to the ground in bloody pulps, half-dead. A low whistle later, two priests were hauling the injured back behind the latest firewall to safety, for treatment. Despite spending the rest of the day there amidst the houses, no more Thrim were found.

There, gathered in the midst of Jaru, each of the Eight reformed, along with the rest of the knights, Anah keeping close to Jhakor's side. "We survived," Elias noted. "With only a few scratches and Jhakor's manhood lost." Jhakor groaned - Elias was ragging on him now, and he didn't think even Elias had a personality to begin with. A few appreciative chuckles rippled through the ranks before falling silent again. The man at the head of the formation gestured behind him, "It's easy to forget, dispatched away as we are, what we are here to protect. Jaru is ours to defend. Tainhelm as well. We protect these people because they need us to. Without us, innocent lives are lost. Today, Thrim claimed twelve, and injured an additional thirty-six. Without us, these numbers would have been much higher." A young woman slipped up behind Elias while he spoke, nodding her assent. "A lovely little lady asked me for permission to speak to you all, before you are dismissed. So, when she finishes speaking, you are free to go." Elias nodded to her, his usual stone-like features breaching into a small smile, "Go ahead, dear," he

encouraged.

“I’m not the mayor,” she began. Jhakor and the rest craned for a good view to find out who precisely she was, as she spoke: the girl was clearly no more than sixteen or fifteen, likely somewhat younger than that. He found himself amused quietly that she had thought to clarify that first. “Jaru is just my home. Everyone else is busy cleaning up, working, crying and healing. But I didn’t want any of you to leave without hearing our thanks. When we’re all restored, there’ll be a feast for all of you. I don’t know when yet, I’ve not mentioned it to anyone else, but it’ll happen,” she insisted. Then, giving Elias a series of quick, birdish bows, suddenly seeming quite self-conscious, she said, “Thank you!” and darted off. The knights smiled almost as one - it was impossible to not be touched by such an earnest thanks; and of course the promise of a feast is something very few knights will look down upon. The Eight slipped off, saying their goodbyes, most starting for home. Jhakor was, however, tugged on again by Anah. “I owe you!” she insisted, “For the kick. And you bought last time, so my treat. Right?” He gave her a quick smile and a pleased nod, letting her once again drag him along down the road - though he was certainly still limping.

Where she took him to was not their normal stomping grounds. Instead, it was a very nice restaurant down in the Medina. Out of the way, expensive-looking, with fancy waiters, Jhakor felt almost like he was at home. “I never did tell you about back home, did I?” he wondered of Anah, who shook her head, “You didn’t, no. Guess we never did talk about family...” She gave a faint grin and ducked her head a bit, seeming quite amused, “I heard Elias came by to say hello.” Jhakor nudged her in the side a bit, wondering, “You put him up to it? He fixed my headache and

threatened to kill me, all in one move. I didn't even think he was a person, truly. Just that they locked him the cupboard when it wasn't time for him to be wandering around all knightish."

Anah's head shook, and they followed the waiter to their seat, a lovely window spot. "No, he's always been like that. Since...well. I was born, at least. My quiet protector." She smiled again to Jhakor and gestured towards the menu, "Anything you want. I mean it!" His gaze darted down briefly - there was no way he was going to make her pay for any of this. Still, she kept telling him to get whatever he wanted, again and again, and he finally gave in and selected the cheapest thing he could find. She beamed at him and, in turn, picked the most expensive thing. This shocked him - both had always been conservative with their coin, sticking to cheaper bars and ale. She selected a very rich entree, with an appetizer, and a wine not even he had heard of, eying him occasionally, almost embarrassed. He narrowed his eyes at her for a moment, then glanced to the waiter, challengingly reeling off his favorite wine for the man to bring. Anah's eyes shot open at that and just before he could cancel his order, she gave a quick nod to send the man away and leaned forward, "I was going to explain some things, but first I think you better explain!" He cleared his throat and admitted, "Ah. Family's well off, in Ashtan. Weapon merchants?" As explanations go, it was fairly lackluster, but he was more thrown off by his simple, down-to-Sapience Anah ordering such expensive food so comfortably. "Oh! I thought you were poor," she said, rather bluntly. Then she blinked and winced, apologizing, "Sorry, sorry. I mean, I don't mind! I didn't! I wouldn't have! Just, I didn't want you to feel uncomfortable." She coughed again and swayed slightly from side to side before suddenly spilling out, "My dad's kind of the owner of this restaurant. And a few others? Maybe five or six. We do pretty well for ourselves, so I'm never short of coin or anything." She pursed her lips again, asking quickly, bluntly for once, "That's not going to run you off or anything, is it?" Despite himself, Jhakor laughed and shook

his head. “No, Anah. I’m not going to run screaming into the night because you’ve got money.”

Dinner arrived quickly and they both told their life stories to one another over it. Anah had been raised, along with Elias, as the perfect little children, intended to dazzle company. Both had perfect table manners, but both had rebelled - just, in the same way. When not all prettied up for others, they had enjoyed fighting in the yard with sticks, pretending to be soldiers slaying vampires. As they grew older, the play turned more serious and it had seemed only natural to both join the Paladins once they were of age. “Dad hated it,” she confided, eyes dancing with amusement, “Mom loved it. Told Elias he’d be a handsome knight for some princess, and me that I’d save the damsel so the men could see how to do it right, for once.” Jhakor grinned and ducked his head, explaining, “Dad’s the supplier for the whole guard of Ashtan. Makes weapons like the swords I have and sells them - we do quite well. But my brother’s older, and the one who will get the family business. That’s just how it is - he offered numerous times to split things with me, but I’d rather not weaken what our family has. And growing up, someone had to model the swords and armor, show people it could take a hit or give one. So, here I am.” Anah’s foot bumped against his under the table and she returned, “So look at you. Rich, good looking, and trained from birth how to handle weapons - born to be a knight, hmm?” He shook his head and admitted, “Not the first time someone has said that, I guess; I do think I fit in well here. I’m happy. This is where I want to be.” Growing more serious, he raised his wine glass up towards Anah slightly, suggesting, “To figuring out where we want to be before we’re old and wasted?” Anah was only too happy to clank her glass against his, knocking back a drink from it alongside Jhakor.

Their conversation lasted far longer than the food had, again lasting late into the night. It must have been past midnight by the time Jhakor realized how dark it was outside, however - Anah was more captivating than usual. Perhaps it was the wine. Their plates had been cleared hours ago but they had remained, simply talking and enjoying each other's company. Given that it was the owner's daughter and her company, nobody who worked there had even bothered to remain - the front door was locked, but Anah had a key to get out and knew to lock up. So, alone in the dark, they continued their conversation for a precious bit longer before Jhakor finally admitted, "I was almost late this morning. So I should probably go to sleep some so I can make it to assembly next time." He rose to his feet and Anah nodded, doing so as well. He offered his arm and she took it, each sliding in their chairs with their free hand and making their way to the door. Anah unlocked it and they stepped into the dark, Jhakor's gaze drifting upwards as Anah locked the door behind them, noticing the dark storm clouds obscuring the stars from view, the only thing he could think of that wasn't, in this moment, perfect. He again linked arms with Anah, reminding her, "My turn to walk you home. So, which way are we going?" She tugged lightly, indicating the direction, and they set off. It was not far from where the restaurant was, despite Jhakor's hope otherwise. They paused there for a moment, not quite willing to say goodbye. Finally, Anah detached herself from Jhakor's arm and turned, poking him in the side - his uninjured one - and informed him, her tone serious, "That was a first date. There had better be many, many more, or you're going to deal with a cross Anah. Alright, Sir Jhakor?" She gave him a quick smile and leaned in, pecking his cheek and wrapping him up in a hug. "I'll see you tomorrow," she said quietly, to which he nodded, squeezing her back before breaking the hug. "Rest well, Anah," he replied equally quiet, tone affectionate, and watched her slip away before turning to walk across town to his own home.

He moved quickly, without Anah there - perhaps some part of him thought that if he fell asleep soon, he'd get to see Anah all the quicker. Or maybe he was simply exhausted himself, and longed for the comfort of his bed. Getting there was easy, following the main street until it broke off to the right, slipping along the side-road a few rows down. As he walked, he became vaguely aware of something wrong. The street was quiet, as it should be, but the quiet felt oddly artificial. Constructed, somehow. He couldn't put his finger on it, but something was distinctly off. And the oddness bothered him, the hair on the back of his neck prickling up by the time he reached his door. He wasn't scared of the dark by any means, but he still kept a hand on his sword.

Everything was perfectly in place. Something that made him pause - everything was, indeed, too perfect. The door had been shut perfectly, the rug at the door entirely straight save for an artfully rumpled right corner - he paused at the doorway and looked back, only his footprints in the dirt of the street near his home. None had passed near his house for the entire day? Perhaps more paranoid than normal, he opened the door the rest of the way and eased inside, eyes glimmering slightly as he willed his nightsight to full strength, gaze darting searchingly through his home. He did not have to look far - seated in his armchair by the fireplace was a man, head canted to one side and peering towards the doorway with an expression of amusement, the dull color of the cloak obscuring his face half-lit by the fire he had apparently started in the fireplace. Speaking before Jhakor had a chance to react, "If only you weren't a knight," the man sighed. "I wish my apprentice had half of your instinct." He moved quickly - almost inhumanly so - rising to his feet and stepping towards Jhakor with an outstretched hand as if to shake, his other held up

and palm towards Jhakor to display it holding nothing. Before forcing himself back to dealing with the intruder, Jhakor noticed the man's footsteps made no noise at all, nor did any part of him, his mottled clothes blending flawlessly with the darkness to make his frame almost indiscernible in the odd darkness. Still, Jhakor accepted the handshake and once again found himself cut off before he could speak, "Yes, Sir Jhakor. I know you well - quite fond of your work. This is uncharacteristic for me, by the way. Speaking to you, and speaking so much, so I shall be direct henceforth: your guild master wishes to speak with you. Take a cloak, it will soon rain. Lock your door behind you, you'll be gone some time." The man's tone was smooth as honey or silk, as was he - Sir Jhakor's brief moment of being caught flat-footed was all it took for the fellow to slip past him and into the night, vanishing immediately.

Jhakor processed all of this for what felt like forever, cogs of his mind turning without quite making any headway. There was little enough to do, his guildmaster's strange messenger aside, there was little harm in returning to the hall - it was, to his thinking, safer than his apartment, which had been so effortlessly broken into by the stranger. Grimacing a bit, he retrieved a cloak and wrapped it around himself, locked his door firmly (and mentally noting to get the locks changed), and made his way back to the hall.

It is here that I will insert a little break, for my story grows longer still - were the traditional arts of storytelling still alive, I would pause for drink or perhaps even retire for the night; I fear we've only just begun our proper story. So eat, drink and enjoy yourself for a time, if only so as to be able to properly appreciate the grandeur of Sir Jhakor's tale (and the brilliance of my own storytelling).

Like all adventures should, Sir Jhakor's began on a properly dark, stormy night. The thunder crashing outside rattled the gate while streaks of lightning illuminated the Paladin Guildmaster's office with brilliant flashes of white, storm having held off in unleashing its proper fury while Jhakor was walking to the hall, but only by mere moments. Within the elegant confines of the aforementioned office, only a few sparse candles were lit, kept carefully away from the window. And there, standing within the shadowy office was Sir Jhakor himself.

Now, of course, it would hardly be the beginning of an epic quest if he was in there all alone (unless he had no recollection and had to puzzle for himself why he was there in the first place, but of course that is not the case here) - indeed, there were three others within the room alongside him. The first was the Guildmaster of the Paladins, Sir Jhakor's grizzled and gruff mentor. He was seated, as one normally is within their own office, firmly behind his desk. The remaining two were seated by the door Jhakor had just entered - one on either side. To the right, upright and stiff as a board was an Infernal knight clad in full battle-gear, the black armor stained with what appeared to be blood, though the way it unnaturally flowed across the armor at a sluggish pace seemed to indicate otherwise. The entirety of his form was hidden behind metal, making it quite hard to tell anything at all about him except that he was quite upright, and quite large - one can only imagine the struggles of the poor chair. To his (and Jhakor's) left was a fiery-haired Sentinel, wearing chainmail and very little else, as the savages tend to, a loincloth and strip across her torso providing for what modesty they care for, a hatchet on her hip (charmingly slung through her loincloth string) and a spear resting idly at her side, propped against the wall. For their parts, both guildmaster and paladin were clad only in their respective

uniforms, though the master's was obscured by the desk. Jhakor's was, naturally, quite spotless. His boots were highly polished, his shirt was as tucked as shirts can be, and he cut quite the snappy figure. Rumbling across the table, the Head Paladin spoke quickly, before Jhakor could manage to ask why an Infernal and Sentinel were even there, "I have a task for you. It isn't a simple one...You will be gone for some time." He paused, grim expression remaining as he elaborates, "You, the 'knight'..." (the word nearly spit out with clear disdain), "...and the forestal..." (this term used with a certain forced politeness) "...are being sent to investigate a particular shipment of items the Infernals managed to lose. I'm told they're historical in nature. Which I think is a crock of shit. But I'm also told they have something of ours mixed in there." The guildmaster's steely gaze locked with Jhakor's, "You're going to help them secure Syvelium's armor."

Sir Jhakor found himself caught entirely flat-footed. The subterfuge involved in sneaking an Infernal into the city, the man sent to retrieve him, the prospect of Sir Syvelium's armor yet existing, the extent of the plot thus far overwhelmed him. His state of tongue-tied allowed the guild master to continue his rambling speech, "A ship is prepared for you, waiting by the docks. It will sail along the coast, to the eastern shore. There, the crew will disembark and leave you with the boat - the Infernal informs me he can sail and knows the way, so you will be in his hands from there." Leaning forward, Sir Jhakor's mentor growled, "I don't trust him, and I barely trust the Sentinel, but I need someone to go along and make sure that things are as they appear. It wouldn't be the first time an Infernal lied, but if he's telling the truth, we will have that armor. You're young, smart, and strong - you can keep him in line. Take your falcon, and act as you must - if you have to break a part of our code to return to us safely, do so. I trust your

judgement.” Ignoring the Infernal’s glare burning into the back of his head, Sir Jhakor gave his trusted mentor a salute, “You can count on me, sir. I’ll bring the armor back safely. Whatever it takes.”

‘Whatever it takes’ seemed to echo strangely around the room to Sir Jhakor, the oddity augmented by his mentor’s abruptly saddened expression. “The final order I have for you is to tell none where you are going. You leave immediately - there is no time for goodbye. I’m sorry to have done this to you, son. I’ll think of something to tell the others, and Lady Anah - I know you two are close. Dismissed.” More hostile now, towards the Infernal, “You, get out of my office.” And then towards the Sentinel, gruffly (but with measurably less hostility), “You too. There’s paperwork to be done.”

The Sentinel wordlessly rose to her feet and snatched her spear from the wall, opening the door and slipping out into the hallway, each step making but a whisper against the floor. After the Sentinel’s exit, the Infernal rose to his feet. A low, amused chuckle rumbled forth from the Infernal as he gave a salute to the knights - though he was clad in full armor, the sarcasm practically radiated forth - and his form abruptly vanished, a dark wind flowing away from where the man once was. Sir Jhakor considered his guildmaster for a moment, then turned for the door after another salute. As he stepped into the hall, a final sentence reached him from somewhere in the depths of the office, tone guilt-ridden and apologetic, “I would go in your place, if I was able - stay safe, Jhakor.”

Head down, Sir Jhakor made his way down the stairs, intending to return home. He made

no more than two steps before a hand shot out from behind a rack of armor, hauling him roughly into the shadows. No longer bearing the capacity for surprise, Jhakor managed only a disoriented, “Uh?” before his eyes adjusted - standing before him, with an hand on his shoulder, was the man from his house. The man thrust a pack into his arms, “What you need from your house. I packed for you,” he explains helpfully. “And I brought someone to see you - have fun, you two.” Giving a sly wink, he stepped past Jhakor smoothly, revealing Lady Anah standing behind him. She lunged forward and wrapped Jhakor up in a hug before he could react, sounding on the verge of tears, “He told me everything. What you’re going after, that you will be gone for a long time...I won’t say a word, I promise. But I’ll wait - you just make sure you get home safe, alright? I’ll be here when you get back.” Collecting himself, Jhakor tugged Anah in for a tight embrace, holding her close for a long moment. “I’ll come back safe for you,” he promises, giving her a peck on the cheek. “I have to go, though - duty calls.” Stepping back, he gave her a small, fond smile and turned to go, but she grabbed his hand. “Just, wait a minute!” she cried, reaching into her belt to pull out a small necklace. “Whoever he is, he told me to give you something. So, here,” she explained, jamming the necklace into Jhakor’s captured hand. “I’ve had that since I was a little girl, it’s for luck.” Self-consciously, she let go of Jhakor’s hand and chided, “...Well, go on then. They’re waiting, don’t keep them waiting!”

Jhakor gave a slightly confused-sounding laugh and a nod, hand curling around the necklace. “Thank you, Anah,” he said. “I’ll see you when I get back.” He stepped out from behind the armor, only to find himself face-to-face with that rather strange man, who seemed (for once) surprised. “Oh. That was fast. You- ...I guess you didn’t. Or she’s laughing, poor girl - either way, off you go. Take care, Jhakor. And don’t trust either of them, they’re filthy.” His

advice given (along with another wink), the man once more darted off before Jhakor could manage to get a word in edgewise. With a sigh, he did the only thing a man in his position can do: he raised his pack up onto his shoulder and started for the dock.

He chose the quieter route, making sure to avoid the main roads as he went. The storm raged overhead, keeping everyone off of the streets - he was entirely unobserved when he reached the docks. It took him no time at all to determine which ship he was to board: there she was, the first in the line of boats, already untied from the dock and preparing to cast off, the gangplank awaiting only him. His boots clunked heavily against it, the wood groaning under his weight as he went. Born of Ashtan, he had no trouble navigating the boat - even going so far as to pull the gangplank up himself. As if waiting on that, the boat pulled away further from the dock and set off into the night, grey sail unfurling in the wind of the storm, pulling away swiftly from the city.

Before resolving to step out of the rain, Jhakor had the sense of mind to at least look around - and what he saw surprised him. The ship was outfitted for combat, grappling-hooks secured by the rails of each side, wooden planks likewise resting nearby for boarding purposes, the walls raised up and curling inward slightly to protect against arrows when crouched behind, with slits carved at regular intervals to allow return fire. Though the boat was not large, it was at least beautifully crafted by some expert builder - the mast bore rich designs that it was not quite light enough to see, various other instances of woodworking at least noticeable, if not entirely discernable.

A particularly large wave was sliced through by the ship as it continued to drive forward, the jolt from the act stirring Jhakor from his contemplation. Moving quickly, he found his way below the deck, stepping into the general crew quarters. Like startled wildlife, those present immediately stopped what they were doing and stared at the drenched paladin, an eerie silence overtaking the space before a voice cried out from somewhere in the back, "What, did you swim to the ship?" The comment broke the silence and laughter broke out, a few more jokes at Sir Jhakor's expense thrown his way. He bore all of it with a wry smile, shaking his head as he slipped past. Clasp ing him on the shoulder, a man - Sir Jhakor recognized his voice as the one whose comment started the teasing - told him, "First door on the left's yours. Go dry off, you look like a drowned rat!" With a grateful nod, Jhakor continued on with redoubled purpose, abruptly tired - so tired he didn't even manage a witty comment before leaving. He found his room with no trouble at all, shutting the door behind him and dropping heavily to a seat in the chair after sliding his pack off.

Hopeful that the odd man who took the liberty of packing for him had the presence of mind to provide dry clothes, he opened the pack and was greeted with the grumpiest, groggiest-looking bundle of feathers he had ever encountered. There, on top of all else in the pack, was his falcon. With a less than pleased cry, the bird started to squirm, moving quite oddly indeed as it tried to free itself from the bag it had awoken to find itself in, its wing still wrapped up in the bindings the falconer had left it in. Surprised for the thousandth time that day, Jhakor was utterly useless in helping his bird to free itself, and when it finally managed it pecked his hand in sharp reprimand for his failure to assist it before hopping from his lap and moving over to rest on the dresser, glowering around the room as if it were somehow at fault for the creature's

ruffled plumage. Jhakor sighed and moved to slice its wing free - true to the falconer's word, the appendage seemed more than functional now. The falcon fluttered it a few times, her feathers ruffled, and spent a few minutes straightening it, enjoying its newly-returned mobility.

Simply shaking off this odd occurrence, resolving to deal with it later, Jhakor returned to his pack, a pile of clean clothes conveniently on top of whatever else lied within the container. He pulled those out, setting them on his bed, and quickly changed from his damp clothes, leaving those out on the floor to dry. In clean clothes and no longer damp, Jhakor moved to drop heavily into the bed, mumbling groggily over to the bird, "You alright?" The creature huffed as well as a bird can huff, but dipped its head in a small nod, still preening - that was all the reassurance Jhakor needed, falling quickly asleep, rocked to peaceful rest by the movement of the ship.

What woke him some hours later was not the commotion abovedeck, nor the light streaming through the port-side window. It was the lack of motion that, above all, stirred him from slumber. The rocking of the ocean had ceased, replaced by an odd stillness. Stifling a yawn, he rose from his bed and peeked out the window - the ship had reached the Eastern Shore and beached itself. Sliding his boots back on, he picked his way through the underbelly of the ship - which was entirely empty of people (but filled more than before with supplies) - and stepped topside. Most of the crew was busily hauling personal belongings down to the shore, those already finished retrieving their belongings clustered together in the sand and staring towards the ship. What Jhakor presumed was the captain limped his way, offering a hand. He introduced himself as Lian (in a very thick accent), glancing towards his crew as if to double-check their progress, and then explained dutifully, "Paid to take you here and then go home. So that's what

we're doing, mister. Ship's all yours, and I hope you'll forgive me for saying I hope to never step foot on it again. Those oars..." He trailed off with a visible shudder and shook his head firmly, "Not for me to judge, but there are some things I hope to never see again in my life. I'd wish you luck, but I reserve that for whoever you are seeking - they'll need it far worse than you." He shook Jhakor's hand again and then, seeming more than eager, grabbed up his bag and abandoned ship. In a matter of minutes, Jhakor was entirely alone on the deck, glumly pondering over what the man had said.

It was there that they found him when they boarded some time later, the Infernal and Sentinel. The flame-haired girl was hauling with her a wolf the first time up the rope, climbing with ease even with the massive beast slung over a shoulder, her hunched posture leaving her knuckles almost dragging on the ground. She returned with a bundle of other animals, bringing them up on board one at a time: lemming, fox and badger. The task was done wordlessly, and without so much as a glance towards Jhakor, the final trip up had her carrying a sizable rawhide pack, which was slung on the ground. From within, she began to pull items and construct a tent, hammering in stakes through the wood of the ship to secure it in place. Thus set up, animals in various states of lazing around the tent (and the entourage having added a raven and butterfly, which settled atop the tent), she slipped inside and stretched out, eyes shutting. In an instant, she was asleep (or at least appeared to be).

Off-put by his companion's less-than-social tendencies, Jhakor had just moved back to inspecting the ship's carvings - the frankly off-putting designs were elaborate, runic marks that he could not quite decipher; they simply gave off an aura of wrongness, somehow. He

was given little time to consider them though, the Infernal clambering aboard easily, a pack strapped to his back. Jhakor wouldn't have ever recognized the man without his armor on. Of quite wiry build, the Kelki that climbed aboard the ship was quite attractive (at least, attractive as the fish-people go). One could suppose that this means his tentacles were luxurious, or perhaps that his skin was a healthy slime - it is beyond the knowledge of this poor scribe as to what makes a kelki attractive; it is simply noted in one of the many journals that was used that this man was, indeed, a very pretty fish. The Kelki's eyes found Jhakor and he gave an ironic salute before moving to go down the stairs.

Jhakor decided, with the Sentinel asleep, to follow after the Infernal, politely inquiring, "Need help with anything? Preparing the ship to cast off? I've got some knowledge of sailing myself." This drew a laugh from the Kelki - this laugh less malicious than the one from the Paladin guildhall by far. "My ship needs no preparation," the Kelki replied, stepping into the room across from Jhakor's own. "Though I think my methods may offend your sensibilities. Come, you should see anyway. Do try to keep an open mind?" Slinging his pack onto his bed, the Kelki gave a small smirk and led Jhakor down the hall, then up a half-flight of stairs to the rower's deck - oddly situated halfway between the lower part of the ship and the deck, enough space for one to almost stand upright. To Jhakor's decided horror, the boat was not crewed with men. Nor with beast. Instead of a person manning each oar, only a single arm did - sickeningly fastened to a post. Each was in a state of rest, runes much like the one on the mast above carved to the post. The Kelki, sensing an objection, interjected quickly, "You do not have to like my methods. But it is the only way - no crew will sail where we go, and no man obeys as well as my hands do." He turned to look to Jhakor, perhaps pitying the slightly green Paladin, "They were

not good men, in life. And I did offer them the chance to surrender, first.” Lips curling again into a smirk, “One should not use any phrase involving ‘cold, dead hand’ in front of an Infernal. It gives one ideas.”

There was a bile rising in the back of Jhakor’s throat, and some measure of fury - but he had made a promise, an oath: whatever it took to return the armor. And he had been released from his vows for a time. There was no other way, and so he must abide by the damnable Infernal’s rules, though he did resolve to watch his back with much greater care. His dark thoughts were interrupted, the Infernal apparently quite talkative, “The food is fit for the living, at least. And I hope you’re not as boring as the Sentinel, this will be a long trip and if I’ve no one to talk to, I imagine it will be quite dull. I’ll make you something to eat, if you think you can stomach it?” Another toothy grin, the gesture paired with the Infernal’s abrupt friendliness setting Jhakor immediately on edge. Still, if it was to be a long journey, it was better to keep the man from outright hating him, so he grudgingly accepted the peace offering of food, deciding there was little point in requesting a Paladin to accompany them only to poison him on the first day.

The meal prepared was a simple one, though there was no denying the skill of the cook - it was roasted bird from the forest, seasoned with some plants that he had found while waiting for his ship, the Infernal explained. “The food on board will last a long time, but is not so good as this. And we can use the innards for fishing to keep us stocked, then the innards of those fish for more fish. You’ll appreciate the variety.” Jhakor poked at his food for a moment, briefly entertaining the lingering suspicion that he was, indeed, to be poisoned, but the Infernal ate

heartily, and so Jhakor began to eat as well. Pleasantly surprised at the taste (and also at not dying), he made an effort to engage the Kelki in conversation, asking about the Sentinel primarily, then further about the mission. On the topic of the Sentinel, the Kelki had little to say that was polite enough to record, seeming less than fond of her. As for the mission, “We’re sailing south. Far, far...very far south. Beyond the continent, there are a string of relatively unexplored islands. Once we’re past the shipping lanes, we should be unbothered by anyone. On one of those islands, a cult of twits stole from us.” He shook his head grimly, hair-tentacles flopping about (these things are attractive to some?) and continued, “To tell you the full truth? They think they have something that will wipe us out. The Infernal guild - I didn’t mention this to your guildmaster, because as you can imagine...well. We couldn’t risk you not helping. There’s a small chance it might. There’s a greater chance it will do nothing. And, ah- well. A large chance it will end the world.” With what could very well be an apologetic smile, the Infernal concluded, “So, you’ll get your armor and save the world. And we’ll take back what’s ours, and the Sentinel will get her axe, and everyone’s happy and alive. Except for the ones who aren’t.”

On that less than pleasant note, Sir Jhakor was left alone as the Kelki (who had yet to give his name) went on his merry way, going to see about reading the ship to set sail. Finding himself with some time alone to finally pause and catch his breath, Jhakor retrieved the locket that Lady Anah had passed him, studying it with a faint smile on his lips as he lounged in the galley, turning the trinket over and over. She would wait for him. All he had to do was his job - do his duty, return alive, and she would be there. A calm, pleased sort of contentment settled over him. He could do this, he knew. He could survive this adventure, and his strange companions, and he would do whatever it took to get back home safely.

Stirred from his mind's wanderings, he felt the ship sickeningly lurch back, grinding against the sand before it returned to the sea - by the time he made it to the window they were already afloat, leaving him with no clue as to how the large ship was pushed back into the water once more, but he was certainly in no place to complain. Knowing how difficult a ship of this size could be to manage, he made his way above deck, pausing in his room to retrieve his now calmer falcon from where it lounged obediently by his bed, placing his feathered friend upon his shoulder as he transported it.

A faint giggle greeted him as he stepped above and into daylight, the Sentinel having woken from her remarkably short nap. Whatever sleep she had gotten seemed to have done the trick: what stood before him was a far cry from the moody young lady he had met two times previous. Pointing to the bird on his shoulder, she wondered, "Trying to look the part? A pirate already, and you've only spent a night on the ship?" Shaking her head as if to dismiss the notion, fiery curls flying, she offered cheerfully, "You can call me Jen. I know all about you, your guild master told me and mine when we first agreed to send someone. It'll be nice to work with you!" With a still cheerful demeanor, she continued without missing a beat, "Just stay out of my way and you won't get hurt. I lose track, sometimes!"

His falcon seemed to sense it was being mocked, launching skyward at the pirate comment. Soaring above the ship in lazy circles, it seemed to at least be enjoying itself. Jhakor watched her fly for a moment before replying to Jen, extending a hand to shake. "Nice to meet you, Jen. Jhakor, it's very nice to meet you," he replied politely, offering a small smile. She

ignored the hand and gave a nod, chirping back, “You as well! Our third wants me to keep to the crow’s nest for awhile, so if all’s well you won’t hear from me for a day or two!” And with that, again assuming the strange, knuckle-dragging posture, she bounded for the rigging and disappeared into the crow’s nest.

Watching the strange girl disappear took a moment of Jhakor’s attention, though he soon roused himself and turned, moving to the rudder at the back of the ship where the Kelki was. “You have Jen watching for something specific?” he wondered of the Infernal, tone curious. With a helpless shrug, the Kelki returned, “She has good eyes, and there are people out here less polite than you and I. Never hurts to be prepared. If you’re looking for something to do, once I get us out into the open sea, I’ll teach you to fight.” Jhakor felt a mild bit of annoyance at this, though he tried to not show it, opting for the diplomatic, “Sorry?” to give the man time to explain. Chuckling, the Kelki replied, “Fighting on a boat isn’t like fighting on land. You need to do things a bit differently, move more fluidly. Less armor, for starters - you fall over in some plate, and you’ll never come back up. And there’s not usually time to gear up anyway” This elicited a grimace from Jhakor, who knew all too well how heavy the platemail could be, and how long it took to put on. “That does make sense, I suppose. What about Jen?” Shaking his head at Jhakor, the man replied, “Jen’s a Sentinel. If you’ve not seen one fight before, you won’t understand until you do - she’s...different than you or I. That spear and axe aren’t her only weapons, and I wouldn’t know where to begin trying to teach her more. So, just you and I to spar.”

The pair fell into silence after that, Kelki focusing on navigating close along the

coast, while Sir Jhakor moved to the railing and watched the ship go, trying to get used to the rocking and rolling beneath his feet. He had, fortunately, been on a ship before, and was not predisposed to sea-sickness, but the motion was still unfamiliar to him. He held on tightly to the railing and leaned forward briefly, grimacing a little as he saw the oars below slicing through the water in perfect, tireless rhythm. Turning to less unpleasant things, he pushed off the rails and looked skyward, spying a red tuft of hair high above that signified Jen's presence, though the rest of the girl wasn't visible. A voice from behind him broke the silence, suggesting, "If you're looking for something to do, go check the weapons. There should be a crate on port and starboard with boarding weapons and crossbows and other things. Make sure the crossbows are paired with the bolts and that those sailors didn't mess with anything." The Infernal's voice took on a firm, warning edge, "And if you see a little orb out of place, *carefully* put it back into where it goes."

Jhakor glanced over his shoulder and gave a wry nod. Then, remembering the scene in the guildmaster's office, presented a quite sarcastic salute that set the Kelki laughing, and moved on to the chests. The first cracked open easily, four or five crossbows arrayed side-by-side, with a nest of ten bolts just below them. He noticed how thick the top of the chest was as well, steel plating covering the top - a man crouched behind could have theoretical cover from return-fire while being able to shoot. The orbs that the Infernal had warned him about were tucked down below the crossbows, some twenty spheres of roughly fist-size, lined ten to a row. As suggested, he checked each strap and found them secured. Though he had no clue what they did, he felt himself moving almost gingerly around them, the warning still ringing in his ears. Satisfied with the state of the first chest, he shut the lid and turned, making his way to inspect the

next. It was in much the same state as the first, perfectly locked-down and tidy, save for one thing: a crossbow and nest of bolts was missing from the line-up. Jhakor lightly checked all of the bindings on the spheres, found them perfect, and shut the chest, going to report back to the Kelki.

He was less than pleased at the news, but shrugged it off, "Nothing to do now. I may track down the captain after we get back, if I remember. With luck, we won't need them anyway." With a quick glance to the rudder, then over his shoulder towards the last shred of coastline behind him, he suggested, "We're past the mainland now. Let's see about teaching you to fight."

Surprised, to say the least, Jhakor likewise turned to regard the distant coastline - he hadn't even noticed they had gone so far so fast. Despite himself he marveled at the ship - disgusting, horrific, nightmarish as the creation might be, it certainly was effective. The Kelki clapped him on the shoulder and gave a little tug, urging Jhakor to follow him down the steps and onto the deck. From the mast, he retrieved four hatchets - little weapon-caches apparently hidden all over - and then offered a pair to Jhakor. "Swords or axes, for ship combat. Something that can cut rope and be swung in tight quarters - nothing bigger than a scimitar, shorter is better," he explained as Jhakor accepted the offered hatches and hefted them, getting used to the weight. He stuffed his own hatchets into his belt and settled into a low crouch, hands raised, continuing on, "You don't even need weapons, with practice - getting disarmed happens. Melees are wild and unpredictable. The sea's your friend, if you watch your positioning. Don't get too close to the rails without realizing it," he suggests, gesturing for Jhakor to attack.

Hesitating at first, but only for a moment, Jhakor stepped in and swung with the hatchet - to his surprise, the Kelki stepped into the strike, arm raising up to meet Jhakor's extended arm at the wrist, then grabbed a handful of Jhakor's shirt and flung himself backwards, a foot planting into Jhakor's chest and kicking him over the Kelki's head. Jhakor fairly flew - the motion expertly timed with the roll of the ship - and slammed into the mast, weapons clattering to the ground as he 'oof'ed. Already recovered, the Kelki bounded forward and tapped a hatchet against Jhakor's chest, grinning at the man fishily. "See? You lose your weapons easily. Clumsy knight." Jhakor stared for a moment, then gave a little chuckle and moved to retrieve his axes, re-raising them to a more defensive stance. This time, he ticks his head at the Kelki, egging him on. Launching forward, the fish-man hacked at Jhakor's chest with one hatchet in a feint, other sweeping low towards a knee. Jhakor didn't even bother with blocking either strike, stepping back and bracing against the mast. The axes swept the air in front of him and then he struck, shoving forward off the mast and kneeing the Kelki firmly in the chest and then bringing a hatchet around towards the Infernal's head. Though staggered, the Kelki maintained his guard, hatchet snapping up to block the strike, other shoved straight forward, flattened head aiming for Jhakor's gut. Too close to do anything about it, Jhakor simply flexed and leaned into the strike, somewhat dampening the hit, and then twisted his blocked hatchet, wrenching the Kelki's weapon away from his hand. Remaining in close, he followed up the disarm by clearing the hatchet away from his torso and bringing his own weapons in to jab the Kelki's stomach back. The Kelki gave ground rather than taking the hit, grabbing one of Jhakor's wrists and tugging. A neat side-step as Jhakor (unbalanced by an unexpected roll of the ship) stumbled forward followed up by a light tap to the back of Jhakor's neck signified the Kelki's second victory in a

row. "You're fast," Jhakor grudgingly admitted. "If you're going to keep fake-killing me, do I at least get to learn your name?" The Kelki's triumphant grin faded, replaced by a glower. "My name's Frank. Laugh and I'll kill you," he grumbled, swinging a hatchet at Jhakor in a batting motion. "Dolt of a human father thought I needed something civil instead of appropriate for a Kelki such as myself. So here I stand."

And so the two spent most of the rest of the day sparring back and forth, with Jhakor winning some, and Frank winning most. Jen presumably still watching the horizon from up above, there was little else to do but wait as the ship made its way through the shipping lane, powered forward by the ghastly 'crew'. The day turned to night, as days tend to do, and all was still and quiet for a long time - though of course things never stay that way for long on an adventure.

It was just past midnight when Jen's voice called down from above, both men still lingering on deck. "Fire south of us!" Frank shook his head, "This is why we're still awake - we've been sailing for a day without seeing another ship? That never happens out here..." He shoved to his feet and called back, "Watch for a ship sailing towards us. Whistle for each one you see. That fire's in our way, so we'll find out what happened one way or another." Jhakor rose to his feet as well, moving towards the bow of the ship, peering forward into the darkness, eyes adjusting instantly to grant him vision through the darkness. There was a few moments of silence, then a loud whistle rang out from above. Jhakor saw nothing for a time, then finally motion ahead caught his attention - a small shape, growing ever-larger, sailing towards them, its outline clearly visible against the burning ship's light. He shoved off the railing with a curse,

moving towards the chest on the port side of the ship, opening it and retrieving a crossbow and some bolts, glancing towards Frank and supposing, "This isn't a friendly visit, is it?" Frank shook his head and called above, "Jen! Company soon. Be ready to come down here if they try to board." And then, not really paying attention to the girl's acknowledgement, he started to strap on weapons, loading up a crossbow and carefully unwinding a sling from around his belt. "These spheres explode if they hit something. Like, a deck. Or a man," he explains, wrapping one up in the sling and moving to the front of the ship. "I'm going to throw one and try to scare them off. If that fails, we'll see if you were paying attention earlier."

The ship was clearly visible now, a massive ram fixed to its prow, showing visible damage. The sail was likewise punctured in a few places by arrows - clearly the burning ship did not go down without a fight. Still, the men onboard the other ship seemed in high spirits, their yelling carrying over the ocean as they psyched themselves up for sacking another ship. Frank and Jhakor stood on the bow of their own ship, quietly listening to the noise. Jhakor looked towards Frank, wondering, "You fought many of these people before?" Grimly, Frank replied, "Quite a few. But usually there's more of us, and they're all sea-born...You'll do, I guess." Thus reassured, the two men fell silent as they watched the ship draw closer and closer.

For Jhakor, it was a frustrating eternity. He felt as if they were simply going to stand there and get rammed, but Frank clearly had a plan, so he waited - impatiently, but wait he did. Finally, by the time Jhakor could see the horde arrayed on the deck of the other ship, Frank started to move. Jhakor raised his crossbow and took aim, eyes narrowing in concentration as he frantically tried to remember how to aim the weapon properly. Meanwhile, Frank's sling started

to whirl faster and faster. “Fire!” he called out, and Jhakor unleashed a bolt while Frank’s sphere went flying. Jhakor’s bolt thunked into one of the pirates by sheer luck, a sharp screech of pain rising above the rhythmic chanting, though Frank’s shot did far more. It struck the deck and unleashed a ripple of fire that must have killed at least ten outright, the inferno raising hellishly from the deck of the ship. Panicked sailors began to hack at the wood after discovering the flame’s stubborn resistance to water while others tried frantically to douse themselves - leaping into the sea in a fit of desperation to escape the fire. Clearly impressed, Jhakor suggested, “Maybe lead with more of those and send them packing?” Frank shook his head, “Those are the only ones left ever, so far as I know. I can’t waste more than one - we can handle the rest.” Shoving Jhakor’s shoulder, the Kelki wondered, “Where’s your sense of adventure? Shoot another bolt, don’t just stand there.”

The two makeshift archers set to work, Frank’s bolts far more accurate than Jhakor’s - though Jhakor did manage to reload and fire faster (it helps to not aim, when going for speed). This served to thin the ranks further, though some thirty still remained standing by Jhakor’s count, most now crouched behind some semblance of cover while the boat got nearer, the fire hacked away from the deck. An uncomfortable fight was certainly ahead. Reaching to free the hatchets on his belt, he shut his eyes and called to his falcon, feeling that same familiar thrill as it responded with a loud cry from above, awoken from its sleep in the rigging to aid its master in combat. A second, unfamiliar screech sounded from somewhere above - Frank’s own falcon, black as night, joined the fray. The pair of birds swept down while the knights set aside the crossbows, unwilling to risk an accidental injury to their companions, simply watching as the birds knocked the sailors of the other ship into the water or tore at skin. Circling back when the

pirates began to hurl sticks or bits of debris at them, the birds lurked nearby their owners, the ships finally coming broadside with one another. Grappling hooks soared over the railing, hauling the ships together. Jhakor was briefly disoriented - the speed of the two ships as they hooked together and joined caused them to slowly spin, nearly knocking the knight off of his feet. He held fast to the rail and watched as men began to stream over the railing and onto their own ship, darting to follow after Frank as soon as the Kelki moved. "Watch my back, and don't go for a swim!" the man yelled back to Jhakor as he charged in.

Frank was not the first to land a blow in the melee. Neither was Jhakor - but then, neither were the pirates. From on high, a piercing screech sounded: not a falcon's battle-cry, but a red-haired Sentinel's. Jhakor didn't see where she landed, but practically felt it, the impact of her body slamming heavily into a pirate's as she leapt from whatever perch she had found, spear impaling the unfortunate man to the deck. Beside her, the well-thrown handaxe she had sent spinning as she jumped thunked into a second's skull, killing him immediately. Fire dancing in her eyes, she rose to her feet seeming entirely unhurt by the fall though her bones cracked audibly as she straightened. This impressive entrance understandably halted the pirates for a moment, but three to twenty-eight is still close enough to good odds, so they surged forward again. Jhakor wasn't able to make her out for most of the fight, though he began to associate random happenings with either her or Frank, depending. While trading blows with a large, barrel-chested man, a scrawny pirate went sailing past with a yelp, splashing down into the water - Frank. A gout of fire erupted, followed shortly by screams and a Kelki shouting less-than-pleased curses? Probably Jen's fire and Frank worrying about the boat. Jen's animals and the two falcons were also felt, the collective might of the forest and sky racking up nearly as many kills

as the three combatants put together. Wolf devouring unfortunate men, while badger and lemming conspired to trip up or disarm fighters mid-swing. The raven and butterfly settled into a horrific rhythm - butterfly transfixing a man before the raven battered into them and sent them overboard, Jhakor and Frank's avian allies shredding faces and, in a few cases, knocking those who thought to swing through the rigging down to the deck or off the ships entirely.

He was not able to concentrate on the others for long, however - his entire attention was fixated on the never-ending string of duels he found himself tugged into. The fight was maddening, in a way - on land, he could kill a man and then turn to fight the next. Here, one man may slide away on the blood-slickened deck only to be replaced by two trying to cut him down from another side. He felt himself slowly turning into a whirlwind, some small circle of resistance against the storm of bodies that threatened to overwhelm him. He knew his allies were in a similar situation, and that served to spur him onward. Finding a moment, he uttered a few words, the area around him glowing with holy power. His eyes opened once more, stepping in to strike at a man, who slipped back to dodge the strike - only to find he couldn't. Rooted in place by the force of Jhakor's piety, he took both hatchets across the torso and crumpled clutching his ruined stomach in an attempt to cling to a few more moments of life. Jhakor pitied him, or would have, had his allies not immediately interrupted with an attempt to stab him in the back. Three beset him at once and he found himself pressed back, though his circle of piety held more rooted in place. He turned to the first two and managed to catch one's blade with his hatchet, the second's strike going wide. Spotting an opening, or perhaps simply inventing one, he looked the third in the eye and spat out, with venomous intonation, a holy verse. The pirate's eyes widened in a mixture of terror and fear, his very soul burning under Jhakor's vengeful recitation, and he

fell dead. The two before Jhakor hesitated as their ally died, and Jhakor didn't - two more pirates fell, one hacked from head down to groin, the other slashed diagonally across the chest. He didn't even spend time to make sure they were dead, just down. A sword lashed across his back, drawing blood, and he whirled to his next attacker, wondering when the onslaught would end. Furious now, he found a pause to smear something from a vial on his weapons, then swung his axes in a wide arc, managing to clip three around him, who all turned to face him with mixture of confusion and anger at the brief burning pain. Then, wordlessly, all three's limbs locked up and they dropped in a heap. He lost sight of them after that, turning his attention back to the few remaining pirates.

When all was said and done, twenty-eight pirates had boarded the ship - or attempted to. Of those twenty-eight, the human (and fish) fighters had accounted for seventeen kills. The animals had slain the remaining eleven in one way or another - charred, maimed corpses littered the deck, more bodies beginning to bob sickeningly as sharks set to feast. Jhakor slid to a knee on the ground in the midst of his holy circle, murmuring quiet words to himself in a prayer. It was with great relief that he felt his injuries start to mend, skin knitting closed where once angry cuts were, his body regenerating under his pious pleas. While Jhakor was busy tending to his injuries, his companions did likewise - first aid was administered to both herself and her companions by Jen, while the Kelki prowled the dead and set his sickening arts to work: a hand plunged into a chest and ripped out a heart, the organ devoured whole. Within seconds, the Infernal stood taller and stronger once again, fairly glowing with new-found vitality. Indeed, against the odds it seemed that only one casualty was to be had - Jen's fox was missing, and no amount of whistling would bring it back.

The clean-up was simple. Bodies were kicked overboard, the deck doused with water until the blood slid away. Stacked neatly by the mast were the weapons captured from the men who tried to take their ship, along with whatever else of value they had. “Never know what you’ll need,” Frank had explained before they stepped across to the other ship, searching it methodically. The hold was filled with goods, presumably seized from ships who had not been so lucky, though most were of no particular use on their quest. Silk and fancy clothes were left behind, though the food was taken and used to bolster their own supplies. Barrels of ale and water were especially valuable, carefully carried over and secured to the floor of the larder. There was ample salted meat and hard tack as well, the food taken doubling their own supplies. Jen’s fox was also located during this transportation, a box containing food showed outward damage: something had gnawed through the wood and slipped inside. Opening it to inspect for rats, they instead found Jen’s fox, gorged on meat and sprawled out sound asleep, its little belly practically bulging. Clicking her tongue at the lazy beast, Jen scooped it up by the scruff and wandered off with it, leaving the two men to continue hauling the last of the crates over to their own ship while trying to hold back laughter.

The pirate ship was set aflame once they hacked their own ship free of the lines that held it - a tar-soaked rag was lit and fired ceremoniously from a crossbow to start the blaze. In a matter of moments, the dry wood was crackling with flame, now a mirror of the burning ship that had alerted them to the pirate’s presence. Frank walked away, moving to the wheel, and spun the ship southward once more. Amidst the crackling of the ship, Jhakor swore he heard a splash - but neither of the others seemed alarmed or bothered, and as Jhakor watched the ship start to fall

to pieces, it was not the only splash he heard.

Sails unfurling, oars beginning to row again, the ship made its way southward. The rest of the night passed uneventfully, though sleeplessly, giving way eventually to day. Calling above, Frank shouted, "Jen! Go get rest. I've got next watch." He seemed truly tireless. Having been awake for a straight day, Jhakor felt himself wearing down, body struggling to remain standing. He was only standing because of his prayers - the occasional murmured verse bolstering his willpower whenever he felt it flagging, body fending off sleep - though it was a losing battle. His muscles ached, his smaller cuts still stung, and he longed to be down in his room sleeping. Frank, by contrast, seemed more energetic than the day before, clambering up the railing like a squirrel would a tree, distinctly at home in the rigging. Jen slid on down as soon as Frank arrived in the crow's nest, looking just as bleary as Jhakor felt.

She also still showed injuries of the night before. Though bandaged well, her leg and side had caught blows in the fighting, and she settled down and started work on replacing them without complaint - though they obviously pained her. Stifling a yawn, too tired for small-talk or even polite requests, Jhakor stepped forward and placed a hand on her side, murmuring a quiet, sleepy prayer. Jen hissed and tensed at the touch and the strange feeling of her skin healing immediately, but did not complain, only moving to offer her next injury to him, quietly murmuring her thanks. He completed the healing for the big wounds, leaving her to re-dress the smaller ones, and nodded, stepping away again to give her space to work. He stepped to the railing, frowning down at it as he ran a hand along its length - it was damp in two places.

Jen was unsympathetic, and Frank didn't care much either. "We're surrounded by water," Jen told him flatly, though seemingly amused. "I'm not sure why water here is more worrying than water there, as long as there's not a lot of it." She punched his shoulder in what was probably intended as a friendly gesture - though it was an awkwardly hard punch - and suggested, "Watch for an hour. I'll rest, then you can go sleep." She flashed a quick smile and, not giving him any time at all to object, bounded for her tent. Each consecutive step there slowed until she was dragging along, moving at almost half her original speed as she flopped down into the bedding, not even getting beneath it, and immediately fell asleep.

Left to his own devices, Jhakor forced himself to pace around the ship, not entirely sure what to do with himself. He knew moving was how to stay awake, but he hadn't a clue where to move. So he settled for pacing the ship, wondering where they were going, and when they would get there. His allies were not unpleasant, but they were strange in their own way. Frank seemed, to him, the friendlier of the two - but he also had lied once, and clearly had multiple motives. And Jen was off-putting, but all forestals seemed like that to him, not quite civil or sociable. He was stirred from his wandering, both physical and mental, just as his thoughts turned to home: Jen was awake again. Having recovered absurdly fast, with only an hour of sleep, she patted his shoulder and practically ordered him to go away and get some rest. Not in any shape to argue, that's exactly what he did.

Paranoid, he took the precaution of searching his room. Of course, he found nothing. Still, he was unable to shake the feeling that something was wrong - between the splash and the damp railing, he was entirely convinced that something or someone had slipped aboard,

but he couldn't prove it. So instead, he did the logical thing and barricaded himself in his room, dresser resting against his door, and laid out his hatchets beneath his pillow. Despite his fears, misgivings and pain, he fell asleep pretty much immediately.

Dreams were not kind to him that day - his mind turned immediately homeward again, torturing him with memories of his knighting feast, of battle alongside the rest of The Eight, and of his drills and training. And, predictably, the dream turned to Lady Anah. Though he had been gone only three days, he already missed having her around. Hardly a day had gone by back home that he hadn't seen her for a moment or two, and the possibility of not seeing her for months was not a prospect he was pleased with. In his dreams, he chased her down hallways for what felt like an eternity, not quite ever able to catch her.

The days passed like this, with one taking their turn in the crow's nest, the two on deck alternating between rest and keeping watch. The only time more than one of them was present was for meals, when whoever was in the nest would climb down - an undertaking that took Jhakor significantly longer than his companions, each step painstakingly careful so as to avoid falling - and the three would eat together, and take turns sharing stories with one another. Jen, for her stories, told tales of grand hunts, of animal companions and the oddities she observed while living amongst the woods. Jhakor told stories of home, of his family's work, immensely proud as he showed off his prized longswords, though he dared not wear them on deck otherwise (one should never bring something on a boat that they don't want to lose). Frank, for his part, stuck to jokes and clearly falsified tales, nothing of home was given. And certainly nothing of his guild was ever brought up. These meals were the highlights of the two months, for Jhakor - he

grew fond of both of them. For an Infernal, Frank was capable of being excellent company, even if he did possess some dark humor at times. And Jen truly tried to be likeable, though her social skills had taken a turn for the worst sometime around the time she moved in with animals, and atrophied further until she met the other two.

It was a quiet week, after that. If you don't count the sea-monster attack, of course. So many dead in so short a time had attracted the attention of things far worse than sharks, and there are things lurking beneath the ocean that one should avoid attracting the attention of. Frank grimly called Jhakor up to deck from where he was sleeping, and pointed. Though it took him a moment, Jhakor was unable to miss the dark shadow lurking below, trailing behind them. Though too far away to make out much detail, the creature seemed easily the size of their ship, probably larger, and just as wide. Gaping, Jhakor wondered, "What...is that?" The question actually caused Frank to stop and stare at him. "How in the Pit should I know what it is? Just ask it's name, should I? It's big, it's a blob-looking thing from where I stand - and it's following us."

There was nothing to do, for the time being, save hope that its appetite was somehow satiated by the corpses. But of course, I wouldn't be telling you about it if it had simply eaten then gone on its way, now would I? And so the duo waited, keeping an eye on it. Jen was called down after an hour of the strange thing following them, and updated on the situation. And so the two turned to three, each staring helplessly at their relentless pursuer. "It's going to get hungry," Jen suggested in a little sing-song. "Then try to eat us." Frank shot her a dirty look, and turned for the main deck, "I don't plan to get eaten. I have an idea, but you two

better not get me killed.” His tone was unusually gruff, and Jhakor at least noticed it for what it was: fear.

The Infernal returned in short order carrying three items. The first two were his axes, strapped to his hip. The last item was a massive bundle of rope, yards and yards long, carried in both arms, and wound all about him. It took a full minute for him to disentangle himself, though the end was still fastened to him securely. “If it comes to us, we die,” Frank explained. “So, since I don’t think Jhakor can swim, Jen and I go to it. Jhakor, this rope is my life-line.” Fishy gaze turning to the man, he informs him, “My life is in your hands. If the rope gets broken, or you don’t pull me back up, the ship will sail on without me. I’ll be dead. I’m trusting you, Paladin. So stick to that honor thing, alright?” He gave Jhakor’s shoulder a light shove, attempting to make light of the situation, but he was still clearly scared - even Jen saw it. In an uncharacteristic display of intuition, she chirped in support, “He won’t drop you. And if he does, I can still swoop and pluck you back up.” It was up to Jhakor to ask the obvious though: “When are you going?”

There was an indecisive silence that fell over the deck, at Jhakor’s question. The creature was massive in size, and they were going to fight an unknown enemy in its own domain. Shaking his head, Frank suggested, “Now? Before I chicken out? We need a way to get it above water first - that’s where you come in, Jen.” He passed the rope to Jhakor, who quickly moved to tie it off on the railing. “Won’t let you fall,” he promised the Infernal as he did. Frank gave a grateful nod, and finished explaining his plan: “Jen, hoist me. When it surfaces to try to take the bait of...me, I guess? Higher, then drop me onto its back. Stay close, hit it with fire or whatever it

is you do - if you see it start to dive, then grab me again quick. Maybe we can run it off without killing it.” He sounded tentatively hopeful, at least. Which was more than adequate for Jen, who took him at his word of ‘now’ and launched upwards abruptly, seizing the Kelki as she soared skyward. He had time near enough to Jhakor to shoot off a few very colorful curses, trailing off until he was out of earshot of Jhakor, a stream of swears still likely coming from the man. Jhakor was only able to watch helplessly from the deck as his companions moved to engage the beast - he resolved himself to perform flawlessly with his given task, however. The rope was uncoiled as needed, giving Jen and Frank the room to move about over the creature, swooping low, so low that Frank’s feet kicked at the water, only to rise back up swiftly.

It was a minute or two of suspense before the monster took the bait, though it wasn’t its bulk that surfaced first - a massive hand shot from beneath the water, making a snatch for Frank. Jen panicked and flew higher, narrowly avoiding the grasping claw, and finally the beast did rise - six arms arrayed along its back, each grasping upwards for the pair that flew over it. The monster’s back was pale, wrinkled flesh, hands twisted monstrosities, and each of its nine eyes rolled upwards, trying to watch above it while simultaneously chase down the ship. Visible just above the water-line was the top of its massive maw, rows of razor-sharp teeth gnashing in frustration.

Its back over the surface, Jen swooped down nimbly, dodging the hands that sought to catch her, and dropped Frank, a gout of fire fizzling against the monster’s water-logged skin. Frank sunk down slightly into its back, axes drawn free immediately, and set to work hacking at skin, drawing black blood from the beast. He called something to Jen, inaudible to

Jhakor, who nodded, her form shifting. Safe on the deck, Jhakor felt something akin to guilt, but he resolutely held fast to his rope, praying the creature wouldn't seize it. Luck was with them, though - the beast was too infuriated by Frank's strikes to its back to bother trying to think, instead clawing blindly for him. Jen's form shift granted her ice instead of fire, and she soared by the joints of the claws, icing them over, their movements growing sluggish in response. Frank was fairly a blur, nimble on his feet despite the unstable environment in which he found himself fighting, each axe burying itself into the creature in a new spot with conviction, hacking away furiously. He bounded about, dodging claws, leaving scores of cuts as he worked towards the first joint of the front-most arm. Jen focused her ice there most, the limb growing almost brittle as it was frozen all the way through, and Frank's strike with both axes nearly severed the spindly appendage. Their battle-strategy paying off, they set to work repeating it on the rest of the rest of the limbs.

Of course, no fight is ever so simple - the monster displayed an ability for thought, twisting and shaking in an attempt to dislodge the unwelcome Infernal on its back, still doggedly chasing after the ship. And then, to Jhakor's horror, its eyes fixed on his. He felt its monstrous gaze lock with his, a dull sort of blind hatred the only thing present within its eyes. The beast lurched forward, beginning to overtake the ship. It ceased to battle against Frank save with two arms, which swatted him away from the other pair of still working limbs - each massive hand cupping into the water to propel its horrific body forward. Grimly, Jhakor tightened his grip on Frank's life-line, and settled himself in for whatever would come next.

Frank seemed to notice the creature's change in intent, redoubling his effort to

disable or run it off, but the hands managed to keep him away from anything too vital, reducing him to hacking ineffectually at its wrinkly hide. Jen swooped and swerved above with more success, the focus on Frank left her free to freeze whatever she could strike out at, following up the attacks with a thrown hatchet - the blade coated with some venom or other from her weapon belt. And aboard the ship, Jhakor could only mournfully watch the creature draw close, sending a silent prayer skyward before doing the only thing he was able to - shouting a holy verse towards the monster, attempting to somehow drive the creature away with his purity. His thoughts were of Anah, and of his guild master, and the rest of the Eight: but at least he was dying doing something necessary. He thought.

Jhakor's purifying chant was not the only thing unleashed as the creature's maw rose from the sea, preparing to devour the ship: Jen unleashed a massive gout of fire at the back of its head, the heat searing and baking even the wrinkled, soaked hide of the beast. And Frank's hands, axes discarded, raked down across its pack, skin and muscle beneath dying at his leprous touch. And the impossible happened. Its head snapped back further, blood streaming from each of its eyes, and it gave a high-pitched, ear-shattering scream of rage and fury, the ship pulling away as it started to sink beneath the water, blood oozing from its wounds. Jhakor managed to collect himself, heaving heavily on the line and reeling in Frank, who had fallen into the water as the beast dropped beneath the waves. It would have been a herculean task had Jen not spotted him after a moment, plucking the water-logged Kelki from the waters and carrying him to the deck.

Plunked down, Frank took his sweet time catching his breath, covered in black,

tarish blood - none of which seemed to be his own. Jen was likewise tired, but she practically glowed with a sort of perverse joy at having bested the monster. The paladin, having been out of the fight for the most part, simply watched worriedly as he waited for his companions to speak. Finding them less than talkative, Jhakor finally demanded, "Well? What the Pit happened?" Blank stares met his gaze, though Frank (of course) was the first to pipe up, "Sharks got it. I saw a mess of them shredding away at it after I made it bleed some, and I guess with all of us going all in on it, the sharks tearing it apart, it finally gave in to injury." Jen gave a single nod, agreeing with Frank in a chirpish tone, "And I burned it really good! So maybe I fried its brain. That usually works." Jhakor wasn't quite satisfied - again something seemed less than right about how the creature's head snapped back, all nine of its eyes snapping shut almost at once, then it sinking down into the ocean. He knew his own devotion was nowhere near that strong, and even injured, such a creature would not be overly vulnerable to something as simple as a shark. But, he simply shook his head and offered a smile to Frank and Jen, "Well. We won, well done. Let's get you two cleaned and healed up. Fish for supper?"

The only distraction available for the two months they were at sea was fishing. Whoever was on deck did it fairly constantly, for it was the only thing left to do that was productive, with the wind and oars driving them forward towards some destination, rudder locked firmly in place. Some ten fishing poles were arrayed on the aft of the ship, lines trailing behind, and hooks baited with bits of fish or meat, depending on what was for dinner last. The fish were always biting, too - either sheer luck, or some oddity of Frank's boat, fish practically leapt onto the lines, tugging furiously on the bait and giving clear indication that it was time to reel them in. The party ate well those two months, finding their fill of everything from bass to

shark, mixed with salted meat and biscuits from their stores.

Their animal companions were another source of sanity - the wild animals that Jen had brought on board grew to tolerate the two men, occasionally allowing them to come close enough to pet them, and in the wolf's case, eventually grew to be an utter attention hog, butting the smaller creatures away for more rubs behind the ear. Jen seemed amused, but never directly said anything about it - simply watching intently the entire time any of her animals neared one of her companions. The falcons got along well, too - soaring high above the ship, they danced through the air in showy maneuvers, each trying to outdo the other, or sat on the crow's nest with one of the knights and watched the horizon as well.

It was over a meal that Frank began to speak honestly and fully about where they were going - and that Jhakor discovered Jen likewise had almost no clue what was to come. So, when Frank started to speak on it, both were quite attentive to listen, food momentarily forgotten, each utterly silent and listening intently.

"We'll be there in a week," he claimed. "It's a sizable island, far removed from the rest of the world - a I discovered in my travels, funnily enough." Frank set his own food aside and continued, tone serious, "The people who inhabit the island are deeply devout, religious. But they worship a bastardization of what you or I might - a single entity, and a violent one. And a decidedly mortal one, at that." He leaned back, eyes shutting for a moment in a small grimace, "I was carrying things on behalf of my guild. I didn't lie - many WERE historical documents, and tomes. Things the Templars would have no stomach for, and the forestals would have no use for -

prophecies and incantations, rituals of sorts. For strengthening the power of necromancy, for minor summonings. The shipment also carried the armor of Syvelium - that was also truth. It was just me aboard the ship when they came, and though I managed to kill some five or six of them, they overwhelmed me. I dove overboard, a trick I learned in my youth, and waited for them to make the next move.” He shakes his head, seeming surprised, “They took from the hold only. My weapons, my supplies, everything was left in one piece. Then they got back on their ship after collecting their dead, and left. No clue as to who or what they were.” With a grim shake of his head, “It took a year to track them down. We only know vague hints of what they’re planning, and their ritual will take place soon. Most of the things they captured make mention of things to be done at a certain time of year. We’ve got two weeks until that time of year. Yes, this is cutting it close. But there was nothing we could do.”

Jen was the first to speak, “Why us, then? Why bring two non-Infernals along to deal with mostly Infernal business? I was told it was a matter of defending the balance.” Her tone was vaguely accusatory, and more than a little angry. Jhakor felt something similar, but held his silence - there was a small bit of understanding that yet glimmered within him. Frank’s next sentence validated that belief: “They knew where I was. And what I was carrying. The guild, and perhaps yours and Jhakor’s...compromised. I wander, I sail. My guild master and I alone know where I go, the same for you and yours, Jen. And Jhakor. The more who know, the greater the risk. So some deception was needed, and for that I am sorry.”

Jhakor was the next to go, more practical, “We’re here, so no sense dealing with being lied to now. What are they like? How do they fight, how many are there?” For once, Frank didn’t

know what to say. “Quick,” he offered after a moment. “Decisive, single-minded. Primarily Horkval, too.” He grimaced again and started to eat, falling abruptly silent, seeming less than enthused about talking about it. This more than anything alarmed Jhakor, who continued to prod, “Tell us about the leader. Who commands them? Why is he so strong?”

This was something Frank at least seemed to know something about: “He invokes both sides. Necromancy and Devotion. It’s a subversive method, though - we believe he holds some captured priest or priestess and drains from them. And we know he holds a necromancer, though the man is in his employ and not captured. These two fuel his power, and that is as much of a plan as we were able to come up with. We are to sail there, hack our way through his cultists, kill the necromancer and free the priest, then kill him.” Lightly, he adds, “Then we load up my stuff, you get your armor and we save the world. Everyone goes home happy, and we never get to brag about this on pain of death, because it’ll ruin us to have admitted to working with the others.”

Jen gave an abrupt little giggle at that. “Maybe for you two. As long as I keep up what I’m doing, I can certainly brag about hunting down anything I like.” She seemed pleased with this, tucking into the rest of her own fish with a vengeance. But Frank’s words struck something with Jhakor, and reminded him of the underlying differences: Frank was right. They WERE enemies, and enemies who might one day have to fight to the death over beliefs. He had let his guard down, but that wouldn’t - couldn’t - happen again. He was very much alone, he realized, and his heart practically ached in that moment for the rest of his Eight. Or Lady Anah. Sensing her master’s despair, his falcon hopped over to rest on his shoulder, feathered bulk leaning against his head in a little insistent nudge. Forced from his thoughts, he gave Frank only a small

nod, then moved to gently stroke his avian companion. "I suppose," he said after a time, "That we will have to do what we must. I promised I would do anything, and that means tolerating your bastardization of life until we are completed." It was unusually harsh for him to say, but he felt sick all at once. This man was a murderer, a maimer, a torturer - the ship they were on was powered by profane magics. He had somehow forgotten, gotten used to falling asleep aboard it, and quietly accepted the man's methods. He pushed his food away abruptly, shaking his head as he stood up. "I'm going to go rest," Jhakor said flatly. Inclining his head towards Jen, he gave Frank a brief glance, and then was gone.

The remainder of the week no longer held that companionable feel. Each was stressed in their own way - Jhakor was once more wary of Frank and avoided speaking to him whenever possible; curt but polite. Frank sensed Jhakor's renewed wariness and seemed to resign himself to it, going about his own tasks quietly. And poor Jen only noticed the new coldness after a day and abruptly shut up as well, speaking no more than a few words to either of them, retreating more and more often to her tent to spend time with her animal companions. Day after dull day passed, time dragging now much more than before, until the week ended. Jhakor was in the crow's nest on his watch when it happened: land, visible on the horizon. He took a few moments, making doubly sure that it was, indeed, an island that he saw, and then gave the signal. Three long, drawn-out whistles sounded, and he started to make his way down the rigging.

Once back firmly on deck, he pointed the way out to Frank, who made the necessary adjustments to their course, and a whirlwind of preparations began. The knights started to tend to their weapons, preparing to once more be back on land, where armor could be used. Jen began to

organize a large roll of rope and various commodities, sorting it out and checking for wear and tear - where she got all of it, Jhakor had no idea, but it was all immediately packed back up into her bag, along with her tent, and she was the first ready to disembark, a full half-day before they arrived. Jhakor had ample time during his preparation to appreciate just how massive the island truly was - it spanned as far as the eye could see east and west, once the ship was anchored off the coast, and the thick foliage of the jungle made it impossible to see how much further south it went, the only landmark existing there was a large, dormant-looking volcano somewhere within the woods.

Final preparations were made, the ship anchored, and supplies were loaded onto a small boat. "The ship will be here," Frank said. "Waiting on us - far enough out that the only way for us to reach it will be me calling it. I'll row the boat back a final time, then swim back to shore, and we'll be ready to go." Jhakor didn't like that plan much at all - too much opportunity for Frank to leave them stranded. But, there was little to be done; he was not nearly a strong enough swimmer to make it to shore alongside the Kelki. Food, water, drinks, weapons and cloth for creating shelter was brought onto the smaller boat, and dutifully rowed to shore. The next trip saw Jen's small collection of creatures brought, as well as Jhakor and Frank's armor and spare equipment. And then, as they sat on the beach organizing, Frank rowed to the ship one final time before diving overboard - true to his word, he swam back and took a few moments to dry off before starting to equip himself. From the beach onward, each of the knights wore their plate and kept their weapons close - Frank's massive battle-axes strapped to his belt, while Jhakor's gleaming long swords were worn on his own belt. Jen kept her spear and axe ready, chainmail donned over her 'clothes'.

As they reached the forest bordering the beach, Jen dropped to a crouch and scooped a hand through the dirt. Apparently finding whatever she was looking for, she bade the other two stop a moment. “Trust me?” she asked with a wide grin, not bothering to wait for an answer - grabbing various leaves and dirt, she grimed up their armor and weapons, doing the same to her own. “Now you won’t shine like a beacon screaming ‘eat us, eat us’ to anything!” she concluded happily, waving ahead. “Onward!”

Her good spirits put the other two slightly more at ease, though none spoke as they pressed ahead, each left to their own thoughts. Jhakor in particular remembered a teaching his knight instructors had drilled in again and again: never go into battle with bad blood between you and your ally. They were heading into combat with an enemy he had never seen before, and he needed Frank. He had promised to do whatever it took, what seemed like so long ago - assured his guild master he was up to the task. And so he knew that he had to make peace, somehow, and swallow his beliefs and pride - survival was the order of the day. He wanted to believe that Frank wouldn’t betray him in the midst of combat, and despite his tactics, the man could fight. Thus resolved, he fought down the mild bile at the thought of those disembodied arms resting on the oars, and decided to find some way to apologize for his statements aboard the ship.

They didn’t make it much further into the forest before Frank had them stop again. “Camp here, rest, get used to being on land,” he suggested. “We’ve got a week, and a two to three day walk to reach where we expect them to be - no sense in exhausting ourselves, or over-extending. First watch goes to Jen, since I now smell like the south end of a north-trotting horse

thanks to her 'trick' with the dirt." And with that, almost cross-looking, he set out his bedroll and slid into it, armor and all. Jhakor chuckled a bit and kicked at Frank's bedding as he went, wondering, "Fish out of water?" just loud enough for the Infernal to hear - the joke was an attempt at a peace offering of sorts. Despite himself, Frank gave a small laugh, then fell abruptly silent again. He didn't seem to have a retort save for falling asleep fairly pointedly, leaving Jhakor to shrug and move to settle down in his own bed and go to sleep as well, savoring the feel of a stable ground beneath his head for the first time in months.

His turn for watch was next, apparently: Jen kicked him awake rather abruptly. "You talk in your sleep," she informed him matter-of-factly. "Who's Anah?" He grimaced a little, blinking the sleep from his eyes, and pushed up to his feet. "Friend of mine," he mumbled sleepily back to her. "Maybe more, when I get back," he added, tone distinctly hopeful. Jen just laughed and nodded, moving to her tent and plopping down. Sloth-like, she was once again out like a light in remarkable time. Jhakor turned and started making his rounds - keeping watch was something else they were trained on. What he wasn't trained on was what happened when he took his first step out of the camp. He stepped on a branch that cracked loudly, startling him. Further startling him, a horse-shoe slung down from a tree and slammed him in the face, hard. Stunned, it took him a moment to collect himself, then reflexes kicked in and he dropped into a crouch, peering around. His eyes took on a glow, piercing the night abruptly, and he watched all around. There was nothing. No movement, no sound, no attack. After three or four minutes, he took a careful step forward, foot nudging forward slowly, then again. He grew slowly more confident as he failed to trip another trap, finally able to resume his patrol. He was sure to give the trap a great deal of space as he came back around, having no desire to repeat his experience,

but there were no more traps, and no more disturbances. After the second third of the night was concluded, he went to wake Frank.

"Morning, sunshine," the Kelki mumbled to him, eye cracking open before Jhakor could even nudge him awake. "You got a real pair of shiners. Try to crawl into Jen's tent?" Giving the man a wry smirk, Jhakor gave him a quick kick in the shoulder, announcing in a loud voice, "You still asleep? Wake up, time for your watch!" Groaning, but moving to stop Jhakor's foot before the inevitable second kick, Frank grumped, "Fine, fine. I'm up, alright? Go get your beauty sleep - sure as Pit need it."

Presumably, the rest of that first night passed without incident, though Frank did find the horseshoe. Jhakor woke to find Frank and Jen both sitting around the fire, snickering and eying him, the horse shoe twirling around Frank's finger. As he saw Jhakor start to rise, he allowed it to 'slip' and fly forward towards the paladin, thunking into the ground at his feet. "You forget something last night?" the Infernal wondered. "Jen was saying she thought she forgot a trap out there, but wasn't sure. I think one of us found it, maybe?" This brought Jen to all-out laughing, a fist stuffed in against her mouth in a valiant effort to restrain it. Gallantly as he could manage, a still groggy Jhakor returned, "Yeah, don't worry - found it for you. Would have brought it back, but I was worried I'd move and find about ten more. Good thing Frank fetched it, be a shame if I didn't hit it again tomorrow night." He gave a stifled yawn and then a low whistle, calling his falcon from the tree where it was happily perched. "Morning to you too," he told it, carefully inspecting the creature for ticks or any injury with habitual ease. Finding nothing after the brief inspection, he moved to the campfire and glanced down at it, wondering, "What're we

eating?"

Jen had been busy on her watch, a few birds and a rabbit were being boiled into some sort of mystery stew, along with various herbs she had collected. She simply shrugged at Jhakor's question, giving a faint grin as he took a few cautious sniffs and gave an approving nod. "Food's food," he admitted, dropping down around the cooking fire with the other two. "Think we'll eat this well the rest of the way?" Frank nodded, "Should - island seems pretty alive. As long as we don't dip into our supplies until we have to, we should have plenty of food for here and back again." Eating was uneventful, though whatever Jen had found herb-wise proved unusually excellent, leading to perhaps more than a little over-eating. It was not long before they decided it was time to move on, remains of the meal buried along with the campfire - leftovers and non-dried foods were too big of a problem to transport, and they were uncertain what sort of creatures lurked about. Better safe than someone else's lunch!

Unfortunately for them, but luckily for our storytelling needs, the rest of the trip was nowhere near so smooth as that. The forest steadily became more and more jungle, requiring brush to be hacked aside or trampled over for the two knights to make progress - a fact which clearly rankled Jen. "Anyone tracking us will have an easy time," she complained, "You two leave tracks like an elephant, and we're clearing enough forest to make a highway." Frank, less than cheerful about slogging through dense vines, returned, "Quicker to burn the thing down and take whatever's left afterwards," sharply, eliciting a low growl from the fiery-haired Sentinel. Stepping in before things got too awkward, Jhakor suggested, "Let's take a break for a moment, I need t-"

Abruptly, and quite without warning, Jen lashed out with her spear at Jhakor's leg, flattening him painfully to the ground, then dove onto Frank, pinning the man down. He blinked and tried, uncertain-sounding though marshalling himself for a respectable jeer, "I had no idea you cared!" She clasped a hand over his mouth and shook her head, eyes moving to the northeast, watching warily. And soon enough even the city-dulled senses of the knights noticed it: moving their way was a patrol of cultists, their forms entirely shrouded in green-hued cloaks. Eight in total, they seemed to float through the jungle with ease, apparently unencumbered with armor, though each clearly wore some weapon at their hip or upon their back. Holding deathly still, each of the knights briefly acknowledged the patrol with a quick glance then went to study Jen, waiting her signal to move once more. After what felt like hours - though was perhaps only a few minutes - the Sentinel nodded and rolled to a side, animals darting in for a quick, whispered conference. Jhakor found himself struck by the oddity of it - conversing with the creatures as if deciding what to do as a group; he found himself unable to deny the efficiency, however. Lemming and badger snaked their way after the patrol, while the wolf prowled northwards, butterfly flitting to the west while the raven soared back. As usual the fox remained, soundly asleep in Jen's saddlebag. Jhakor and Frank sent their falcons forward in an instant as well, keen avian eyes remaining yards ahead of the group to pierce through the obscuring jungle foliage to watch for more patrols.

At a practical crawl, the group inched forward, waiting for their makeshift scouts to report back with news of an incoming group, ready to take to cover at a moment's notice. Each person was on edge, weapons sheathed but nearby at all times, no more joking or conversing

between themselves. Instead, wordless, they pressed ever onward towards their goal, the snail's pace and low profile required taking heavy toll on their legs. Jhakor for one felt relieved entirely when Frank allowed them to stop for the night and begin setting up camp. They selected a low place, concealed from all sides by foliage, bushes, trees, and the natural curvature of the earth, each concealing their bedding with further piles of leaves or vines, a natural blanket of plant-life. The birds were called back, and Jen's creatures likewise, and all settled down for the night. Frank elected himself as the first night watch, and the grateful two who were not Frank settled in and quickly fell asleep. The night passed quietly, each watch tense as they scoured the nearby jungle for any signs of life, though none noticed anything.

Morning came far too early for Jhakor, the night's sleep leaving him distinctly not rested. Still, he packed up the camp and continued on without complaint, again exercising the same strategy of scouting ahead with their entourage. This time, it paid off almost immediately - a falcon gave a cry from above and they went to ground, a group of four cultist slipping past to the north. Each wore the same distinctive camouflage cloak like the group seen yesterday, but there was one among them who had something of a distinction to his garb: protruding from his head was a pair of silver horns, gleaming dully in what little light trickled through the trees. Something about this man set Frank on edge. He tensed beside Jhakor, who tried to shoot him a warning glance, but he was too late. Enraged, the Kelki shoved up to his feet and bounded forward, axes drawn, attacking the man with the silver horns. Cursing under his breath, Jhakor shoved to his feet as well and moved to help the bloodthirsty Kelki, leaving a very confused Jen behind.

Frank's rush was immediately intercepted, two of the hooded figures shifting so smoothly Jhakor couldn't even tell they moved, each taking an axe that Frank had intended for the man in silver horns. The blades seemed to bounce off of them, though with an audible crack. Still, seeming mostly unharmed, each lead out with a bare-handed punch at Frank's torso, connecting and sending the man sprawling backwards. Then, still moving as one, they drew their blades and advanced. The third slid around the pair dealing with Frank and stepped towards Jhakor, while the one in the silver horns simply drew his own blade and waited, unnaturally still. Jhakor's left hand raised in a slash towards the shrouded figure that stood before him, trying to drive him back in order to get to Frank- but to no avail. The creature simply took a slash across the belly and drove forward with his own dagger, nearly gutting Jhakor then and there. Only a quick twist on the Paladin's part saved him from being injured, the blade grating against his armor. Grunting, Jhakor brought the pommel of his other sword around and drove it into the thing's head, which did seem to at least disorient it - another audible 'crack' as the blow landed. Frank's furthest attacker from Jhakor fell, apparently not immune to weapon blows, one of Jen's axes firmly lodged in its skull. It didn't take long for Frank to recover either; having lost his axes, he instead grabbed the cultist before him's arms and tightened his grip, the thing giving an unnatural chitter then screech of pain as its arms grew limp and shriveled up, useless. Defenseless, Frank reached up and snapped its neck, though he recoiled uncertainly as he did. "Horkval?" he wondered as the thing fell, its hood revealing the accuracy of his statement. "Stab it, Jhakor!" the Kelki called quickly towards the embattled Paladin.

Stabbing his opponent proved difficult, the Horkval rather steadfast in his refusal to simply stand still and die. He was almost as skilled a bladesman as the Paladin was, each thrust

summarily parried, each combatant a whirl of strikes and counter-strikes as they twisted and turned, moving too fast for any to interfere. Finally, something in Jhakor gave and he abandoned his attempt to thrust. He twisted his wrists and pulled each sword upwards, knocking the Horkval's twin daggers up and out from its body. Then, he inverted each weapon and brought the hilt of each crashing inward, caving in the bug's head. Handily slaughtered, its carcass fell to the ground in a heap- no sooner had it fallen than he whirled about to find...his companions staring at him in surprise, and the silver-horned being nowhere in sight. "Well?" he demanded expectantly.

Frank, as usual, was the first to speak, "We couldn't get close, didn't want to leave you - so we didn't chase when he ran. But...damn. Never actually saw you fight on land before. You fight real pretty." The compliment was, of course, mixed with an awkward leer and immediately followed with, "Don't let it go to your head, though. Cheap win's still a win if you're not dead at the end." Jen nodded her assent with Frank, "Nice reversal." Each seemed to have collected their equipment and, after a moment, Jen stooped downward and retrieved a slightly bloodied cloak for herself, slinging it around her form. "Blend in!" she added, well pleased. Each knight glanced to the other and shrugged, securing cloaks for themselves as well. And again they progressed onward, though Jhakor made sure to linger back near Frank, demanding of him, "What the Pit was that? Just attack them with no warning?" Frank grouched back, "That's the bastard who attacked me. So next time, I'm killing him. Stab horkvals, axes aren't great, but I'll get him anyway." Jhakor stared at him, actually halting for a moment, then double-timed to catch up before hissing back, "You just ambushed him because he fought you awhile ago? They know we're here now!" To Jhakor's surprise, Frank laughed darkly and returned, echoing oddly in unison with Jen, "Good." The agreement seemed to surprise Jhakor and Frank in equal measure,

both of whom turned their gaze to Jen, who added, “Trap them when they look for us, thin them out. Saves time too, no more sneaking!” As if to demonstrate her point, she bounced forward a pace or two, fairly thundering through the undergrowth before settling back into her normal practiced prowl.

Jhakor had to admit, she was right. Sneaking was not something he liked, and it was especially hard in armor. So being able to pick up the pace again as they were was something of a relief: nothing to worry about as far as discovery goes, if the entire place already knows you’re there. And, he reasoned, what’s the worst that could happen?

It took him precisely three beats to realize the answer to that question. One, “So what do you think they’ll do?” he asked. Two, Jen replied, “Search parties focused where we were, then working outward. Or send a group from there in a line to find us.” Three, an earth-shaking roar split the trees and flames spewed forth several yards to either side of the group. Uncertainly, Jen suggested, “...Or set the place on fire and send whatever that was in to finish the job?” Cursing, Jhakor took the lead this time, uttering prayers to Anyone who felt like listening, both blades drawn. Frank and Jen at his heels, their horde of animals nearby, they did the only thing they could do with fire licking in the trees all around them: they charged.

The cause of the bellow was not hard to find. Jhakor had fought a Teradrim before, deep in the bowels of a cave alarmingly near Enorian. He knew what a golem looked like: a large, earthen being. Roughly human-shaped, unintelligent and dedicated to its master. He remembered also how it folded into the earth when the owner was slain (much to his relief). What he didn’t

remember was the golem being a towering, fifteen foot tall monstrosity made of volcanic rock, its eyes ablaze with what he could only assume was fury. And that is precisely what they faced: standing at the center of a clearing, the creature seemed to have been raised there, for there was no sign of damage behind where it stood, and it was impossible for such a being to have walked there without leaving a horde of broken trees in its wake. As it saw the trio rushing it, the beast gave another shout and slammed a fist into the ground. The earth began to roar, and Jhakor heard Frank yell from behind him, “Two paces left!”, his voice seeming to trail that way. There was no time for thought, only reaction - continuing forward, he side-stepped twice to the left. Not a moment after, the earth where Jhakor was just running tore itself open into a massive, yawning chasm that soon slammed back shut, the impact of it closing tearing the knight from his feet. Scrambling, he quickly re-found them and continued his mad charge, not quite having the faintest idea of what to do when he got to the being. Thinking fast was something he considered a strong point, but he was at a loss. Thirty yards. The thing was now simply standing there, waiting. Twenty yards. How do you kill something made of rock?! Ten yards. It really wasn’t fair. Five yards. And then, suddenly, he had something of an idea. “Don’t ask, just follow!” he called to his companions. And then he ran straight at the creature. And then, right between its legs. The monster ponderously stared as the heroes charged beneath it and right on past. With no signs of stopping, Jhakor hit the tree-line behind the monster and kept on going, hacking his way northward, panting heavily for breath. Behind him, he knew the pair was with him still, he could hear Frank laughing like a maniac.

They ran and ran, and didn’t stop until the creature was out of view behind them, each flopping down on the bank of a river bend, carefully concealed against it. Breathlessly, Jhakor

managed to choke out (still speaking over Frank's cackling), "Too tall...to chase through trees. Not big enough...to break them down after us." Jen rolled her eyes and flopped down, the cat-like gleam in her eyes fading and replaced by something far more slothful as she grumbled back something about stupid monsters. It took the two knights almost an hour to recover themselves, though it was a pleasant hour: no doubt the cultists were scrambling with their monster being "defeated" so quickly and dousing the fire set to entrap the trio. They didn't allow themselves longer than that to rest, however - with the sun starting to set, they resolved to camp here by the stream. Jen vanished into the woods though they occasionally caught sight of her setting various traps and snares. Frank and Jhakor set to concealing the local area somewhat clumsily, and reinforcing the effort by digging more into the riverbank, creating something of an overhang for them all to lie beneath. Tired, sweaty and hungry, they settled in for an uncooked meal (campfires would give them away) and a restless night's sleep.

If the reader wishes, I suppose one could take a liberty and imagine a luxurious bathing scene with any particular character(s) one wishes - though that is outside of the scope of this highly factual recounting and I can only humbly speculate as to potential pairings: that being said, I encourage you to get it all out of your system now, for the tale has much further to go and precious little happiness ahead - and presumably one is to be judged should they choose to involve Frank in any combination of their imagined scene(s).

They didn't bother setting a watch that night, the animals and only one entrance more than sufficing for security. Jhakor himself only woke once, to a scream in the forest. Jen's traps were apparently effective, and inspection in the morning would reveal a male troll impaled

through the midsection by a brutal spring-loaded spike trap. Countless victims perhaps behind them, they cleaned up their camp as best they could, Jen recovering her supplies as possible, and they set on their way doggedly northward, each squeaky clean and well-rested, all things considered.

Again their method of scouting ahead proved useful, this time alerting them to an imposing squad: over fifty in all, marching towards them in a line of sorts, two men thick, with scythes. Each swung his scythe to the left then right, with the man behind swinging scythe right to left then back again in a steady cadence, each moving almost as if one singular entity. This line extended as far as any could see left or right, no doubt attempting to flush them out of any brush they may be hiding in. More alarmingly yet, the mismatch of creatures - some humans, goblins, ogres, horkval and other races, each had a set of glowing red eyes. The trio hunkered down as the line slowly advanced on them, eying each other uncertainly. “Ideas?” Jhakor wondered under his breath so as to avoid being overheard by those seeking them, “I got the last one.”

Frank was quiet for a moment then replied, “I have a way, but you’ll have to stomach some more dark magic,” to Jhakor. The Paladin considered for a moment, then lowered his eyes. “We’ve come this far. Guess I’ll trust you again,” he mumbled, torn between sickened and embarrassed, between his respect for his friend and his revulsion of necromancers. This seemed enough for Frank, who called to Jen loudly, “Cover pretty-boy’s eyes. He won’t want to see.” Then, rising to his feet, he stepped towards the crowd. As one, all eyes fixed on the necromancer, and they wordlessly moved towards him. Frank waited until the semi-circle was formed and

dropped to the ground on a knee, cursing the land itself in a foreign-sounding tongue. At his bidding, countless hands shot forth and grasped at the limbs of those advancing on him, locking them in place. Then, with a sneer, Frank opened his mouth wide and let loose a cloud of green, spraying it forward vigorously in a disgusting display - the cloud contacted with the half-circle around him with an instant effect, all within grimacing and dropping to their knees, clutching their throat as their body rebelled against the noxious air. "Go," Frank managed to cough, seeming a little sick himself, far less healthy looking than moments ago. In response, as the cloud cleared, he punctured through the back of a nearby troll's back, ripping his heart cleanly from the man's prone form. Consuming it shamelessly, he wiped the back of his hand across his mouth and moved forward, not waiting to see if his allies followed. They did, of course - though far less boldly than he. Each held their breath as they passed by the area, their pace further sped as the grasping hands snatched near them, frantically clinging to anything they found - be it man, vine or each other, the forty-nine living prone forms clutched tightly by rotted limbs.

The trio made their way quickly past the second failed attempt at capturing or slaying them, wordless - Jen constantly looking over her shoulder back towards the group, while Jhakor kept his eyes forward and wordlessly pressed on. Frank took the silence in stride for a moment, but grew visibly more agitated with each unuttered thought. The day was half done when he finally burst: "What? I saved us. You asked, so I did it, Paladin. And I didn't see any axe-throws to help me either, Sentinel," he growled out, whirling to face his companions, eyes ablaze. "You like to take the high ground, but when it comes to saving your ass, it's always me who gets dumped on for it." Jen flinched slightly at the accusation but Jhakor raised his eyes and stepped into it, shoving Frank. With a scowl, he spit out, managing to sound sincere despite his tone

dripping with disgust and aggressive posture, “Thank you.” Frank was halfway to a punch before he realized what Jhakor had said, eloquently rebutting with, “Buh?” Shaking his head, Jhakor stalked forward, “I wasn’t strong enough to save us. Thank you. Let’s hope it isn’t needed again.” Frank dropped his arm, stepping back a half-pace to let Jen pass by as well, then blankly turned and followed after the Paladin and Sentinel, seeming lost for words yet again.

It was approaching the end of the day - their third day on the island - when they reached it. Abruptly the jungle gave way to a massive volcano, the towering feature rendered invisible by dense foliage until almost the last second, Jhakor nearly falling over as he tried to bring himself to a halt before stepping out into the open. He settled for a low crouch instead, and delicately parted the brush to peer ahead, his companions doing likewise. Some yards west of them, a large gate stood closed, barred against entry by a portcullis of sorts: the inside of the volcano seeming to serve as a fortress for the cultists. Patiently, two massive golems stood guard outside the gate, the permanent fixtures seeming far more appropriate here than in the jungle. The three withdrew back, setting a camp back far enough in the woods to avoid detection from those entering or exiting the gate. There, while eating yet another uncooked meal, they took stock of their equipment and options. They were in no place to siege, and certainly didn’t have the time anyway; by Frank’s reckoning, they had a week or less to get in there and interrupt whatever ritual was about to commence. As Frank put it, “We have two targets to kill, then the leader. Then supplies to retrieve, all while an army tries to kill us.” Things did seem especially grim, an impossible situation presenting itself. No way in, no way out, and no possibility of retreat, it was an impossible situation. Finally, Jen hazarded a guess, “Let’s...see if we can just walk in? The golems aren’t smart, and we have this cloak. Head down, blend in, hope? We can out-run them if

it doesn't work, and we're not back any further than we are now if it fails." Frank stared at Jen for a long moment, then glanced to Jhakor - who seemed likewise uncertain. Hazarding, the Kelki tried, "...Crazy has worked so far. Maybe one more time?" Jhakor nodded slowly and it was decided - and there was no time like the present.

The golem guards saw something they saw every day. A trio of cloaked figures moving towards them in perfect step, a single-file line with hoods raised. Wordlessly, they did as they had been made to do, opening the gate for the procession. What they had not been trained for, however, was the abrupt darting of animals that followed; while from time to time some creatures would sneak inside, never before had they observed quite so many doing it all at once. Still, creative thinking was not a task assigned to either of them, and so they dully reported as per orders and resumed their wordless sentry duty.

Ahead, the path snaked three different directions, thick volcanic stone supporting the walls of each path. The cloaked figures, who you've surely figured out were Frank, Jen and Jhakor, looked around uncertainly as they stepped inside (making sure they were out of the way of the guard's point of view). Their animals crowding protectively around them, they held a quick whispered conference to decide which way to go. Or, they would have had they not been interrupted by the nocking of crossbows. Silently, a small group of horkval had arrived from the center passageway, each aiming a loaded crossbow at the group. Behind them stood a far larger man, a Xoran with a modified crossbow in each hand. "Kill," the being commanded, and the horkval obeyed. "LEFT!" Frank shouted at the same time Jhakor yelled, "RIGHT!" Each complied with the other's suggestion, darting off, leaving Jen to tear left on the heels of Jhakor.

The animals likewise fled, though their path took them back to corners of the room strategically near the gate, the clatter of bolts hitting the ground was followed by a singular, meaty thud. For Jhakor, time slowed to a crawl. Something sickening, something wrong, something horrific - a sharp pain in the chest, but not HIS chest. As he hit the wall, out of range for the moment of the line of fire, he turned and spied his falcon - his beloved companion and trusted ally - fall in what appeared to be slow motion, a massive bolt cleanly through its core. Eight more hit it, each of the same make, before the bird finally landed, more dart than once-living being, with a ninth shattering on the ground just beneath it.

For Jhakor, his entire world ceased. The bird had been his company through the entire trip, it was his partner in the Paladins. She was with him when he was first knighted, and with him every step of the way ever since. A part of him died, as the bird did, and he found himself utterly lost in a mindless rage, a blinding hatred. With no regard for what lay before him, he drew his long swords and whirled around the corner, Jen's confused gaze helplessly following after as he made to rush the line of crossbows, who were busily reloading. Nothing else existed for him in that moment but the Xoran behind them. Not the wide-eyed Frank who watched from across the hall, not the blank-staring line of marksmen ahead of the Xoran, and certainly not any other creature that was watching: for him and his fury, only one enemy existed. The line of archers was shattered as if it was made of parchment, swords cleaving through the nearest four to clear a path in a single, sweeping stroke. Where he derived his strength from he never knew, but he glowed with a blue fury that left anything before him reeling. As the four fell, the six remaining swept to protect their commander with unnatural precision, but a gout of actual holy fire spewed forth from Jhakor's lips, his entire form fairly quaking with righteous fury, blades alight with flames.

The six were immediately consumed, charred husks crumpling to be ground to dust by his step. The Xoran watched in shocked disbelief as his charges were slaughtered in two attacks by the rage-fueled Paladin, then raised both crossbows. Firing rapidly, he released all ten bolts from his not yet fired crossbow, then fired the next ten from the one he shot first, all to no avail. Jhakor dodged or deflected each while still advancing forward, more nimble on his feet than anything the Xoran had ever observed. As he drew in close, Jhakor raised his blades on high and slashed downward and cleaved his foe cleanly in twain. Nightmarish creatures spewed forth from his blade in an instant, consuming the Xoran, and an unnaturally powerful giggle tore through the halls. Omei's favor - for indeed, it was the Goddess of Nightmares Herself that empowered Jhakor's strike - drove his blades cleanly through the stone, scoring twin slashes through the stone, his weapons entirely undamaged. He righted himself, only barely noting Someone powerful in his mind whispering, "Vengeance through any vessel. You avenged your ally in the midst of your Nightmare, and I claimed My revenge as well. Should you survive, I may have use for you, Paladin..." And then the presence and energy departed, leaving Jhakor standing with tears in his eyes amidst a pile of corpses, blades lowered to his sides.

There was not long to stand and admire Jhakor's prowess. A large detachment, the proper defenders of the fortress, were charging towards the lone Paladin, blades raised and far more crossbow bolts aimed towards him than he could possibly dodge. Behind him, thunderously stepping against the floor as they ducked beneath the massive gate, the golems were coming - summoned by their master to put an end to the abrupt invasion. And so Jhakor did the only thing he could do - he broke back towards Jen and ran, tears still clouding his vision, leaving the body of his beloved bird behind to be trampled by the countless feet that charged in pursuit of the pair,

and abandoning Frank through necessity. Heedless of doors off to the side, Jen and Jhakor fled deeper into the complex in a blind panic, bowling over anything or anyone that happened upon their path. Finally, what they were looking for appeared: a massive set of doors, mercifully opened, provided escape from the thundering footsteps just around the last bend. They darted inside and shoved them closed, then rested back against the doorway as they worked to catch their breath, eyes wandering around the room they found themselves in.

Military in style, the latrines smelled awful - but it was comparatively better than the fate that awaited them outside the doors. The first wash of rank air was accompanied by a reminding sound of crashing feet as the party continued to chase after where they assumed the heroes had continued running. Jhakor gave it a ten count and moved to open the door, once the sound of feet faded - but Jen grabbed hold and shook her head. Then, three beats later, more footsteps echoed, charging on past down the hallway. "Always a second group. Catches what the first misses," Jen hissed to him before allowing him to move into the hallway, blades ready. As it was when they first arrived, it was entirely deserted and devoid of life. Now they had time to observe their surroundings, surprised at what they found. Decorating the walls were painting after painting of various monstrosities and creatures, a plush red carpet beneath their feet. Golems, dragons, demons and sea-monsters decorated down as far as the eye could see, with double doors spaced evenly every few yards. "What is this place...?" Jhakor wondered, but Jen only shrugged and grabbed for his arm, tugging the dazed Paladin across the hall. She dropped to a crouch and pressed her face to the key-hole, peering through. Brightening up, she gestured inside and carefully opened the door.

Sheer luck seemed to be the order of the day (unless you were a falcon) - Jen had located the armory. They safely shrugged off their cloaks and swapped to a full set of properly outfitted armor, then re-donned their packs, concealing them carefully beneath their bilious outerwear, and stepped back into the hallway, at least more capable of fitting in than before. Stepping together in time, the pair marched their way boldly forward from there, heading after the detachment that had been sent to hunt them down if for no other reason than to avoid having to retreat and deal with the golems outside. They turned a corner and, to their surprise, found a man clad in a black cloak with two similarly dressed men flanking him. "Ah, there you are," he said, eyes alighting on Jhakor and Jen. "I wondered how long it would take you to get here to replace these two - here, look. One of these is limping. Miserable creatures you are...what are you waiti-" He cut off as his guards drew their weapons and wordlessly positioned themselves between the man and the disguised duo. "Oh, I see. Like that, is it? Well. Kill them."

Instantly, the guards complied - each Horkval stepped forward in their oddly fitted armor and lashed out, though Jhakor's stumbled uncertainly on his leg. Fearing a faint, Jhakor half-stepped back while Jen cleanly slaughtered hers without so much as breaking a sweat - the creature's right arm gave way halfway through a swing and it nearly crumpled to the ground, far from healthy. Jen's spear punched through its shell right in the midsection, the man dead before he fell to the ground. Jhakor felt it too, all of a sudden: a wave of wrongness, his very life force sapped from him. The source was easily discernable too, the black-cloaked man was not even bothering to conceal his power from the pair, a cruel smirk on his lips. Jhakor lunged in abruptly, realizing how precious time was, and ran his Horkval through as well. His did not die immediately, however. The light that burned in its eyes started to fade, replaced by soft brown

ones, and with his final breath, his slain foe rasped out a slow, unsteady, “Thank you,” after a dizzying burst of weak chitters. Then, slumping over, it died on Jhakor’s sword.

Withdrawing his blade in an instant, subconsciously striving to process the Horkval’s last words, he turned on the necromancer with Jen. “Peasants,” the man spat. “You raise blade against me? I’ll resurrect you a thousand times over, to kill you again!” His hands began to scab over, coating themselves in leprous spots, and he lunged forward, trying to capture Jen and Jhakor both. Having seen Frank perform a similar tactic, each drew back and lashed out with their weapons, batting aside the necromancer’s attempt to shrivel their limbs. Jen blasted a gout of fire as a follow-up attack, while Jhakor hurled a holy verse - the attacks crippling the man. In an instant, nothing was left save a dark, foul wind that darted off into one of the side rooms, slipping under the door. With a curse, Jhakor turned and shouldered into it, only to find it locked and unyielding against his weight. Jen moved towards the door next and, after careful inspection, proceeded to blow alternating fire and ice against the lock for a moment before slamming the haft of her spear into it, cracking the weakened metal and opening the door with a groan. The duo raised their weapons and slipped inside the murky darkness of the staircase that lay beyond, descending into the underbelly of the volcano after the man.

The stairway was deserted, seeming almost entirely unused. As they descended, Jen whispered to Jhakor, “You think that’s the guy? The one powering the leader?” Jhakor just shrugged his shoulders helplessly, wondering back, “You think Frank’s having any more luck than we are?” Jen’s lips pursed into a thin line, but she said nothing further, her hands tightening around her weapons until the knuckles were practically white, eyes fixing firmly ahead. Jhakor

noted her clear discomfort and let the matter drop, albeit uncertainly, and continued down the winding stairway. What awaited them at the bottom was enough to nearly cause Jhakor to retch - a laboratory of sorts had been constructed here, away from the fortress. In various states of decay, countless corpses crowded the lab tables and were strewn about in piles on the floor, each maimed or dissected almost beyond recognition. Some had their flesh sloughing from their bones, others had various appendages removed or cut in half, all bearing extremely painful-looking injuries of some degree or another. Jen gave a low growl and pointed - the swirling mist solidified rapidly in the middle of the room. The cultist flung his arms wide, a booming laugh echoing around the dank laboratory as he straightened, his wounds seeming to heal immediately. "Welcome to my playground," he hissed, gesturing towards Jhakor and Jen. On command, each of the maimed corpses began to stir, pained groans tearing from their lips as they started to work their way to their feet; those without feet or legs or unable to stand rolled and began to drag themselves forward, compelled by the curse of the foul necromancer.

"Trap," Jhakor noted as he saw the corpses start to stir, raising his longswords. He again felt that same corrupting influence stretch towards him from the necromancer, who simply stood behind his writhing line of minions, waiting on the reanimated corpses to do his work for him. "Get him, I'll watch your back!" Jen called to Jhakor, axe already whirling into the mass of partially-decomposed flesh, dropping one of the zombies before it found its feet. She lept forward, spear set to spinning in the midst of the horde, catching her axe once more. The creatures encircled her and tried to drag her down, to claw her, to strike or slow her in some way - but the spinning of her spear battered all of them back, smashing through any arm or skull unfortunate enough to get close. Thus distracted, none of them noticed Jhakor rushing forward to

deal with their master save the master himself: faced with an angry Paladin charging him, the man reached to his hip and produced a bone dagger, flicking it with speed towards Jhakor. Jhakor batted it aside and raised his other sword to strike - much to his surprise, the weapon re-appeared in the man's hand, and was flicked again. Unable to dodge this time, he twisted to the side slightly, allowing it to graze across his armor. For such a small weapon, it left a visible rent on his armor, not quite drawing blood on the skin beneath, but it was a near thing. His blade slashed down again but was stopped short; a card was produced from a small deck at the man's hip, a hanged man card flung at him. He found himself entirely entangled in rope, starting to fall off-balance while he clawed at them in an attempt to be free. With a smirk, the necromancer drew his dagger once more, approaching Jhakor at a casual, leisurely pace. "You, then the bitch, then more to enjoy for research. Delightful."

He gloated visibly as he stepped in, dagger drawn back. Jen was too far away and surrounded by the dead, only barely warding off each groping hand, already suffering from the occasional cut. Jhakor was falling almost, off-balance and hopelessly tied up in rope, each squirm seeming to only make things worse, struggling to slice them away with his sword. All too slow, too far away, and time slowed to a crawl once more. The dagger arced downwards, its point gleaming and slick with an unknown poison. Before the gesture could continue, Jhakor felt a gust of wind at his back, dark cloud surrounding him before surging forward, forcing its way into the necromancer's throat. His eyes bulged and he dropped the dagger, one hand clawing at his throat while the other reached for his belt, an eye sigil clutched tightly. From nerveless fingertips, he cast the sigil down and the blackened wind withdrew a half-pace, coalescing into none other than Frank. Bloody, the side of his face bruised, Frank was in less than a good mood, electing to

take it out on the necromancer who had rendered him corporeal once more. Both axes crashed down, meeting each other in the middle of the necromancer's neck. The man didn't bleed as the living might as he fell, rasping fruitlessly out of his ruined neck. Frank finished off the undead with another lashed out strike of his axe, cleanly decapitating him. As the necromancer fell, the minions assaulting Jen likewise dropped and fell still once more.

He turned towards Jhakor and Jen, half-slumped and visibly drained. "Welcome, Jhakor," he muttered, moving to rip out the necromancer's heart. He consumed it and at least seemed slightly more recovered, though still dog tired. "Had a Pit of a time finding you two. Dumb luck, I guess." Frank jerked his head towards a natural vent in the ceiling, admitting, "Heard Jen shouting, took a chance and floated on down. Glad I did." He slid his axes away and offered a hand out to help Jhakor up, hauling the man to his feet and dusting his armor off. Then moving towards Jen, he wondered, "You alright too? Did good holding those things off." Jen was cut in countless places, glancing down with wild eyes at herself before fixing Frank with that same gaze, wordlessly nodding to him. "Fine," she returned. "Let's get going- that's the one necromancer we needed, right? Just one more to go?" Frank nodded and started towards the stairs, axes held loosely in each hand as he went.

Jhakor fell quiet and trailed along behind his companions, longswords kept half-raised as his thoughts drifted back to his falcon. For her to have been with him for so long, only to be so callously slaughtered - surely there was something he could have done. He should have left her outside, or had her not come with him in the first place. The ache accompanied him as the trio walked down the hallway, backtracking towards the main entryway. The hall was once more

deserted, something that Jhakor didn't notice at all - but Frank and Jen certainly did. Uneasily, Frank wondered, "There's nobody. They know we're in here...what are they doing? Why aren't they looking for us?" He sped up his movement up, leading the group faster down the hall, making sure to pause at each bend in the corridor to peer around it, his grip now much tighter on his axes. Each empty turn seemed to leave him more and more on edge until they reached the entryway, again empty. He cursed under his breath again and again, skittering through and to the tunnel all the way across the hall. Jen followed, prowling low to the ground, her eyes wild as they stared towards the pile of corpses that Jhakor had left still there. For his part, Jhakor's eyes moved to linger guiltily on the blood smear on the floor, all that remained of his beloved falcon.

The party moved past, none particularly keen to linger in such an open spot. The passage Frank had selected was similar in shape and design to the previous one they had been in, with the same paintings and red carpet. Again there were double doors on each side of the hallway, though Frank didn't even pause at any of these. Explaining tersely, "When you two ran off, I went this way. I found her, but- well. I guess you'll see." And see they did, in short order - the hallway was traversed all the way to the last turn, which lead to a downward sloped balcony. The balcony overlooked a massive open area some twenty feet below.

The reason for Frank's concern was immediately clear: there, in the midst of the remains of the cultists forces, was the priestess. She was chained down to a raised altar in the midst of the group, and all others were arrayed facing her. "Bad," Frank summed up, gesturing towards an edge; every man and woman that stood below was contained within a summoning circle. "Sacrifice that big? There's no telling what they're calling," he whispered quietly, brow furrowing. "Jhakor, there's one way to maybe stop this. I know you want to save her, but there

might not be a choice.” Jhakor glanced over sharply to Frank, staring at him for a long moment. “You want to execute a hostage?” he hissed back, at least having the sense to keep his voice low, “How am I supposed to agree to that? I’m here to save people, not kill a damn priest.” Jen shook her head too, protesting, “How would you even get to her? There must be a thousand of them down there. Won’t just let us waltz in and murder her.” She eyed between Frank and Jhakor uncertainly, almost as if sizing them both up, clearly concerned about something. Jhakor nodded his assent with Jen, then waited for Frank’s reply. He was not left waiting long, the Kelki rising to his feet. “Jhakor, I like you. I really do. But I can’t seem to do anything right - at least at first. You always forgive me, or at least understand. Here’s to hoping you do again.” And with that, he brought his battle-axe arcing around (though he did use the back, so as to avoid actually killing) and smacked Jhakor in the skull with it, then launched a booted kick at Jen. Neither were expecting an attack, the axe to the head stunning Jhakor decisively, and the boot knocking Jen on her rump. Both were helpless to watch as Frank turned, drew a crossbow from where it was strapped behind his pack, and fired with one smooth motion towards the prone priestess below.

The shot was precise, but a half-second too slow. Beneath the overhang, concealing him from view, the large form of the cultist leader finished reading from an ancient mhun-skin scroll, making a forceful gesture towards the assemblage of glowing-eyed people. Each perished the moment his incantation finished, collapsing like so many sacks of meat to the floor. The priestess was not spared, the bolt spearing through her right eye a mere heartbeat after her life-essence was offered up in the foul deal that the cult had wrought.

Jen and Jhakor shoved back to their feet and each turned according to their priorities;

Jhakor spun towards the priestess who was chained to the altar, hand outstretched helplessly from the balcony, far too far away to do anything, and far too late. Jen slammed her spear haft into Frank's leg, tripping him up, and thunked a boot down upon his chest, axe drawn back as if to throw. He made no move to stop Jen, simply staring back at her with a challenging fire in his eyes. "I was just too slow anyway," he hissed. "So if you're going to kill me, save it for after we deal with whatever he just summoned." She sneered, but lowered her axe and returned her attentions to the floor below. Frank likewise picked himself up and grimly waited for what would come next.

They were not kept waiting long, the altar beneath the slaughtered priestess seemed to sink into the floor, an unnaturally dark bloodstain trickling down from it and spreading through the rest of the summoning circle, touching each of the bodies in turn, corroding them until nothing was left save for an inch-deep pool of viscous liquid. It began to bubble and writhe, horrible smelling fumes rising up to choke even the trio up on the balcony - how the lead cultist managed the stench is anyone's guess, so close to the source. Still unaware of each other's presence, the group and the lead cultist watched with interest - the former more horrified while the latter stood elated - as the liquid substance seemed to take on a life of its own, drawing back in towards the central focal point of the circle, piling itself upwards and slowly forging itself into the shape of a dark-skinned woman. Though too far away to accurately guess height, initial speculation put her somewhere around six feet tall, her form well-muscled. Preserving the demon's modesty was a suit of silver armor that seemed to force its way to the surface from beneath her, bubbling up through her blackened skin before hardening and steeling itself in place.

Carefully, quietly, Frank speculated, "She's not the one we thought they were summoning. Dangerous, yes. World-ending is only a possible maybe, if she feeds enough. I guess that's what the horde offered was for - with us here, speed the time-table up and strengthen her immediately, kill us, then use us for more strength, and feed from there. Absorb some neighboring islands, some pirates, some merchant ships, continue to get her stronger..." He trailed off, eyes narrowing in focus. A strange, reddish sheen overtook his eyes and he looked directly below them, sneering. "He's below us. Bastard. At least he hasn't seen us yet?"

As Frank spoke, their luck ran dry. Below, the cultist lord was busily explaining the terms to the demoness, who seemed progressively more and more pleased. "...And that is why I summoned you here, now. Intruders. I would rather play my hand now than have them ruin everything and leave me without you, Lady. So please, I beseech you to find them and slay them - grow stronger with their death!" The demon's head twisted to an unnatural angle, mimicking crudely the stretch a mortal might give before setting to work on a task. "Those above you aren't your friends?" she wondered coyly, not seeming to need an answer. Sliding from within her hands, two blades materialized from beneath her skin, their coloring as bright as her armor. "They saved me a walk," she continued, legs bunching up, taking aim at the support columns that held the balcony up. "You should move," she warned the lead cultist, giving him a second to comply before launching forward, blades severing the two columns. The trio barely had time to register the strike before their footing grew uneven, balcony crumbling downward beneath its weight and the weight of the group, sending them falling the ten or so feet to the floor in a pile of debris. While they scrambled for their feet, the demoness walked back through the rock, her armor and weapons not visible, black skin melding seamlessly through stone. As she paused,

head still cocked to one side to regard them in an amused, almost curious manner, her armor and weapons once again re-manifested themselves from within and she lowered into a duelist's stance, one blade raised to point squarely at Jen, other reversed along her arm and raised up almost as one would hold a shield.

"Well?" she taunted Jen, "Going to keep me waiting, Sentinel? Or should I wait for one of the men to help you along?" Jen gave an irate screech at that, eyes blazing with flame as she lunged in, axe flung towards the parrying sword in an attempt to distract, gout of flame billowing forth towards the demoness as she moved in for a frenzied attack. Jhakor moved to assist but Frank grabbed his arm and stopped him. "Watch the demon," he hissed. "She'll get in your head- ignore her and just kill it." That said, his restraining hand turned to shove Jhakor forward towards the demon while Frank himself turned and eyed the cultist, axes slipping free as he moved his way.

Jhakor gave a nod - though of course Frank was unable to see, with his back to Jhakor as he moved away. The Paladin raised his swords and moved in to assist the embattled Sentinel, surprised despite himself at the venomous demon's taunting. Even after Frank's warning he felt ill-prepared for what he overheard as he approached, a veritable verbal novel being thrown in Jen's face. Everything from comments on her imperfect body to her lack of success thus far to her inability to get along with others, nothing was spared. And, more subtly horrifying, anything that seemed to have even the faintest of effects on Jen's fighting was remembered and brought up again, in further detail. The monster's mind moved as fast, if not faster, than her body did, her twin blades hacking away, each coming nearer and nearer to making decisive contact

with Jen, who was torn between frustrated and infuriated by the taunting, giving in slowly more and more, her guard becoming less and less, attacks wilder and more furious. Of course, the demon took full advantage of this, her own blocking and counter-thrusts entirely unaffected by the wordless shriek that Jen was producing in a vain attempt to drown out the taunts. Jhakor increased his pace and interjected into the fight rather abruptly, shoulder-slaming the demoness from behind. There was a time and a place for honor, and now was far from it. She stumbled and turned, facing both opponents now, and continued to decimate Jen with verbal taunts while watching Jhakor out of the corner of her eye, trying to decide which would attack first.

"Jen!" Jhakor called out over the steady hissing of taunts and insults, raising his voice to be heard. "Let me deal with her a bit, calm yourself some, then come back in. Don't let her get to you!" There was an awkward pause, and he added helplessly, "You look nice and you're a nice person?" in an inadvisable attempt to somewhat counter-act the monster's verbal jabs. And then, partially to block out the memory of his awful compliment attempt, launched in himself and started hacking away. Her full attention turned to him then, seeming quite pleased to have new prey to mock. She started slowly, carefully feeling out his guard with her one sword, other used to parry anything Jhakor threw her way, the two circling one another. First, she set in on his looks, "Pretty boy thinks he can prove he's a man with two swords? Compensating, maybe?" came the predictable jeer, which Jhakor shrugged off, feinting in with his right and slashing low with his left. She blocked both, but changed tactics abruptly, striking out herself with her right as she tried then, "Going to protect the precious damsel? What will she think when I kill you, and then her? She'll get to watch you fail, poor dear..." Again this hardly seemed to bother Jhakor, but he made a fundamental mistake: he opened his mouth to reply. Thinking his wit quick enough to

out-match a demon who had made her entire fighting style crafted around infuriating her opponent into a foolish move, he taunted back, "What will the cultist think, when his pet can't stop us from ruining his plans? You talk too much. Try fighting instead." The demon's lip curled into a smirk, tone almost honeyed as she jabbed with elegant ease, both literally and figuratively, "What's that? Traveled all this way? Maybe a young little lady that you're eager to get back home to?" The faint tightening of his jaw was all she needed to see to press her advantage there. Using both swords now for offense, she drove the Paladin back inch by inch, her speed out-matching his own, each blow parried nearly driving him to his knees. "Worried she's found another? Maybe she has. Anyone better at sword-play than you wouldn't be hard to find," she hissed out. "You're ruined, boy. Nothing you do here will save that. I may not be gifted with future-sight, but even one blinded there such as I can read it in your lines. Die here and know peace." Again she lashed out, but Jhakor managed to parry again. Still, he was decidedly reeling from the verbal assault - perhaps some magic of the demoness' making, or perhaps his own internal doubts and worries about Anah surfacing - he felt his concentration slip again and again as memories of her rose into the forefront of his mind's eye. Jen seemed to have gotten her head on straight, an axe sharply smacking against the blade of both knight and demon as they clashed together, both having swung high to low. The force of the third weapon knocked both to the side, Jhakor stumbling at the unexpected release of pressure, as did the demoness, each stepping to their respective lefts to compensate. Jen took the opening to launch back into an attack on the monster herself, buying Jhakor some time to try to steady himself.

Knowing Jen was fighting her, he fell to a knee and raised a fist to his forehead, cursing under his breath. Without her fighting and taunting him, all of his worries seemed to vanish in an instant, no longer under her spell. Jen's intervention had prevented the spell from quite

destabilizing him to the point of inability to fight, but it had been a near thing. He uttered a low prayer under his breath, tracing through the familiar rites to calm his pounding heart, one hand seeking out - and quickly finding - the trinket Anah had passed to him before he left. His eyes closed peacefully and he started back to his feet, resolving to re-enter the fight and relieve Jen once more, his memories of Anah clutched comfortably, securely close.

Frank was far from idle during the fighting himself. His lips curled into what can only be described as an unimaginably cruel smile at finding the cultist leader - silver horns still secured firmly to his head - standing nearby. His axes lowered enough that they dug against the ground, he cooed in a sing-song to the sneering man, "I'm going to kill you, I'm going to kill you...and when I do, you'll thank me..." The cultist's retort was not substantial once the profanity was removed, though he did draw forth twin knives; suffice to say the main driving force of his comment was something to the effect of "Gut you like a fish" but far less clever, and far angrier. Frank simply laughed in his face, his skin starting to melt and putrefy, axes raising and eyes alight with cold fury.

To say that the cultist had a chance would be both a disservice to the truth, and to Frank's manic rage. The first knife slashed ineffectually against the Infernal's semi-liquid skin, the second punching into his shoulder. Twisting, Frank relieved the man of the dagger still stuck in his shoulder and then dropped his axe with a clang. His right hand shot forward and caught the cultist's at the wrist, locking the hand with the weapon up in a steely grip. He leaned forward, almost in kissing range, and hissed to him, "This is the part where the screaming starts." And, true to his word, it did.

Jen and Jhakor had found the pattern to win. Or at least, to survive. No single combatant could hold their own against the demon for more than a few moments and hope to stay sane - countless years having taught her quite well how to pick apart the confidence of her opponent, and dissect their style. But, quite by accident, they discovered a flaw of sorts. She could only remember one opponent at a time. The second time Jhakor entered the fray, she seemed to have entirely forgotten that jibes about him being the 'gallant knight' and his physical build had no effect, starting over from the beginning. Her sword style seemed to reset as well - she primarily focused on a defensive manner first, growing more aggressive as she thought she had them pinned down to a weakness. They stuck to dueling her however - Jen had tried to re-involve herself too soon, before Jhakor disengaged, but the demon was masterful at manipulation and had the two nearly colliding with one another as they tried to dodge or duck her feints and jabs, one still getting an absolute ear-full. Each would take turns rotating in, managing to score the occasional strike on the demoness - any pain elicited the same response; a wordless shriek of rage and a redoubling of her attempts to pin them down with blade or taunting. And then finally, something gave: carefully crouched behind the demoness, Jen set a trap while Jhakor distracted her. The trap was all it took - the trip-wire released a series of darts which sprayed into the back of the demoness, setting her into a loop of rage-screaming as she felt her body start to lock up with paralysis. Jhakor drove both swords into her belly and twisted, disemboweling the beast while Jen's axe sunk to its spinal column. Twitching the demoness managed to burble out a final taunt, aimed at Jhakor, as she fell away, "Never...happy...again." Her armor melted first, hissing as it ate away at the floor before drying to a dark stone, then the rest of her body followed suit. In moments, only a rapidly-hardening puddle remained of the monster.

Tired, Jhakor slid his swords away and turned to look about for Frank. It didn't take him long at all; the infernal had positioned himself on the floor, cross-legged, next to his kill. It was far from a clean one, the withered limbs of the cultist curled inward towards his body, too short and weak to prevent the horrors that were inflicted on its torso: split open from waist to neck entirely, organs had been meticulously sliced to pieces and bones broken, twisted, or otherwise rearranged. The crowning piece of this monument to pain was its sternum punctured through the entirety of a corpse, a note with Frank's name attached. Logistics of where the parchment came from and why he bothered signing it aside, the sight was quite horrific.

Jhakor's stomach once again only barely contained himself, and he took a moment to swallow the bile building in the back of his throat, quite ill-feeling at the sight. "Frank," he managed to croak. "Let's go." The Infernal gave a simple nod and rose from his seat beside the body, hands covered in so much blood the Kelki's normal skin-tone was completely obscured, replaced by a muddy red. "Ready," Frank replied, gesturing towards the obstruction blocking the way out, "But we need to clear this. Or climb back up and explore that way." Jhakor and Jen's gaze followed Frank's gesture, grimly studying the ruined entryway that the demon had collapsed in the first place. The rest of the circular room had no obvious exits - setup almost coliseum-style, with the balcony and some seating overlooking the large ring where the summoning circle and two remains were, the slump of rubble blocking the northern - and only - exit. With a shrug, Jhakor started to pick his way towards the rocks, dully noting, "At least they killed themselves. Most of them. So the place is empty...let's try the middle passage." And so they did, Jen keeping well away from Frank, who sullenly paced at the end of the column, shoulders hunched up defensively.

And so they continued, each fragmented very much from the others and lost in thoughts. Though their weapons were in their sheaths, they were all clearly tense and jumpy - Jhakor forcing himself to pay attention to each corner in an attempt to forget the image of the mangled cult leader, dissected and horrifically tortured. Jen likewise struggled along, not paying any mind to anything around her, seeming abruptly lost and uncomfortable within the hyper-controlled structure of the volcanic base, longing for the wilds. Frank once again was defensive, his jaw set; he wasn't wrong, he knew. He had killed the man they were there to kill. They might not agree with his methods, but he knew in his heart that they'd eventually come to grudgingly respect his results. Even if they'd never admit it to even themselves, they'd come around.

There was not a noticeable soul, not a twitch, not so much as a breath of air within the entire hide-out save for the trio that marched along, each lost in their own thoughts. The simple-minded design of the halls had them back at the entrance soon, feet moving automatically, mechanically, to trudge forwards. Jhakor's eyes never quite alighted on the spot his falcon was slain, the memory seeming too painful for him to deal with on top of everything else. And so he shoved it to the back of his mind, and turned back down the main passage. Without guards, without adornment, this seemed the primary part of the fortress, with bunk rooms visible all along the way. Walking for what felt like a mile, nothing changing save for the occasional repurposing of a room, they finally found what they sought: a massive set of gilded double-doors, straight ahead. Frank offered glumly, his companions flinching as he reminded them of his presence, "Hide the valuables at the end. You go down the middle, you fight everyone they've got, and everyone asleep, and everyone hurt in the medical offices. And only then can you have

it.” He slipped past the two, giving Jen’s shoulder a little shove back as she clipped him, and retrieved a large key from beneath his shirt. He slid it smoothly into the keyhole, not bothering to explain where he had found it, and turned it. The door unlocked without even a groan of protest, well-balanced despite its massive size, and it slid open smoothly.

Surprisingly, Jen was the first inside, darting ahead of the others once the door was open but a crack. Frank paused, surprised, and craned his head around the door to peer inside - once it was opened fully, Jen nowhere in sight, Frank and Jhakor found themselves flat-footed at the sight of the hoard. This was no simple treasure trove, but bookshelf upon bookshelf of tome and scroll, the spaces between fairly paved with riches and various trophies. Piracy had apparently factored strongly to both their recruiting and their funding, the leftovers seemed all stored away in this room under lock and key. Jhakor and Frank glanced to one another and then moved in as one, practically sloshing through a layer of gold coins as they made their way inside. Neither cared overmuch for looting, both instead stalking forward with their minds fully focused on their individual task. Jhakor’s eyes darted left and right, seeking out that legendary armor he had come so far for, while Frank’s eyes roamed across the spine of each book, seeking the tomes his guild had lost. Neither were making much headway, but a voice - Jen’s voice - called from the western wall, “Here!” Both set off at a double-quick pace, coins sloshing around their ankles as they rounded a bookcase. Set into the wall, a door had been shoved open by the Sentinel, the lock lying shattered on the ground. “Armor and books, right?” she speculated, gesturing further inside. Frank nodded and shoved his way in first, “Right. Books,” he agreed, pausing to shoot a glance towards the most magnificent set of armor Jhakor had ever laid eyes on: “And there’s your armor, Paladin.”

Jhakor stepped inside a few paces, feeling his foot snag on something. He barely had time for a, “Wha-?” before the rope tightened around his ankle and jerked him sideways sharply. The quickly-rigged trap held his weight, knocking him down as a weighted net fell from above. Where or how the trap had been set so fast was beyond him, but there went Jen, bounding over him and charging towards Frank. “What the Pit, Jen!?” came Frank’s confused cry, axes flashing out to parry Jen’s spear as it thrust towards his heart. “Necromancer! Desecrator!” she screeched. “We got what we came for. No more need for you, monster.” This was a side of Jen neither had seen before - Jhakor was actually dumbfounded enough to cease his attempt to disentangle himself for a moment as he worked to process, while Frank had his hands full with avoiding taking an axe or spear to the chest. “What are you even talking about?” he managed in-between parries; what the girl lacked in formal training she more than made up for in raw speed, fury and power. “Forest-burner,” she cried. “I saw what you did to those men, monster! Saw! I’ll purge you, the true threat, and properly save the world. Jhakor will help me too,” she continued on, a white-hot rage burning in her eyes. Again and again her spear and axe tore at his guard, and each time he managed to hold - though losing ground step by step. Jen without her animals, and Frank without his falcon, neither held the high ground. Jhakor pinned likewise neutralized benefits neither were sure who would hold - not even truly Jhakor himself. He agreed with her, but she was trying to murder their temporary ally. Torn between common sense, hate of necromancy, with his honor and careful friendship with the Kelki in the counter-balance, the moment he made his decision was the moment he broke free. Long Swords were drawn and he turned his gaze to the fight, stepping in swiftly towards Jen.

Frank was a bloody mess - those few moments that Jhakor had spent debating and trying half-heartedly to free himself having not been kind to him. Scores of slashes across his chest, gouges on his face and arm, countless small wounds - Jen without so much as a scratch. Some soft spot perhaps, or maybe just surprise at the attack; he wasn't making any attempt to strike the Sentinel back down. This cost him dearly: noticing the Paladin tearing towards her, Jen dropped her axe after fainting, grabbing onto Frank's arm and jerking him forward. The man was caught off-guard and off-balance, impaled upon her spear. His eyes widened in shock, a bloody burble the only word he could manage. And then, with Jhakor's shout roaring in her ears, she opened her maw and released white-hot flame from it, bathing the Infernal in its heat.

Jhakor halted in his rush, shocked. The flames consuming Frank flared up once, brightly, the flash blinding all present in the room, Jhakor going so far as to shield his eyes against it. Once the light and fire had cleared, there was nothing left of the Infernal save for a bloodied pair of axes on the ground, everywhere but where his feet had been scorched and coated in soot. Those two footprints were all that was left of Frank. Eyes wild, she turned to Jhakor. "Oath-breaker," she accused, advancing on him then. Murder in her eyes, she launched in and began to berate him, "You were going to help him! Save him!" Axe met sword, spear bounced off of metal armor. "You heard the demon! One of us was to die, you two intended to kill me!" she accused, shoving him back and inhaling, starting to glow as the flame grew within her once more. Jhakor's fervent denial, "No! Stop it. We don't want to fight," seemed to stop her for a moment, her spear lowering hesitantly, though her eyes were still wide. Carefully, in a sign of good faith, he lowered his own guard, precisely what she was waiting for. Spear swept low and caught behind his legs, tripping him up. Down he went, the Sentinel cocking back her arm for a throw,

sneer on her lips. She had truly calculated everything down to a fine point - everything but one. That sneer remained frozen on her lips, a 'plunk' sounding from a corner. To Jhakor, a cross-bow bolt seemed to grow from her forehead, right between the eyes. She snapped back slightly with the impact and then, lifeless, pitched forward to slump beside the prone Paladin. A vaguely familiar voice sounded from the corner, "I really hope that's the last of that. I'm entirely out of bolts." Finding his feet faster than any man in armor had ever managed before, Jhakor whirled to face his savior - the mysterious man from his apartment.

Of all the people who could have been standing in that corner, I don't think any surprised our knight more than that. He simply stared, thunder-struck, for a long moment. Easily, the figure pushed off the wall, somehow still clinging to shadows as he approached the wonderful armor on the stand, "Pick your jaw up, Sir. It's going to catch a fly. This is what we're after, right?" Without quite looking towards Jhakor, he kicked the stand and set Syvelium's precious armor to rattling, then tutted as he started towards the scrolls. "Time to explain later. You've got armor to put on, because I'm sure as Pit not carrying that. And I've got scrolls to burn, I think - the world could do with less demons, not more." Jhakor mutely moved, stepping over the body of Jen, and slipped out of his own battle-damaged gear, wrapping it tightly in cloth and packing it away. Struck numb by the loss of his two companions, and dumb by his abrupt saving, he didn't manage a word until Syvelium's armor was wrapped around him. "Thanks," was the first thing he was able to say, sounding earnest - and more than a little scared to death. "For saving me. She...I guess the demon got to her more than I thought?" A faintly distracted chuckle echoed over from behind him, where the man was busily building a pile of scrolls and dousing them in what appeared to be alcohol from a hip flask. "Aye, but that's not what set her off," he explained

smoothly. “She wasn’t all there, poor dear - should collect something personal she had, to return to the guild. And grab poor Frank’s axes too. Then we’re out of here.”

It was done almost as soon as the man said it, Jhakor simply dumbly following orders, seeming unable to do much more than that while the shock lasted. The pair trudged back down the hall, the mysterious savior in the lead for once, instead of Jhakor, and he found himself mixed with relief and misery. The mission had succeeded, after all. The threat was killed, he was alive. He was going home, to his Eight, to Anah and his guild. But there was an ache, too - he lost two friends, in the end. To the madness of this place, to trying to save the world and reclaim bits of their guild from aggressors. Even though what he had done was amazing, beyond words, a story for the bards, he knew in his heart that it was not something he wanted sung. Just like his first battle, the march to the jungle felt far less like a proud parade and more like a retreat; he wasn’t running from a mortal enemy, but from the memories of what happened. Most of all, he just wanted to find time to sleep, for the hurt to stop. Perhaps sensing the troubles of the Paladin, the cloaked figure didn’t go far into the forest. “You three were famous friends, while it lasted,” he offered as he built the campfire, letting the Paladin rest. He quickly prepared dinner, apologetically allowing, “My skills aren’t quite as refined as the Sentinel’s cooking, but I do know a few tricks...” Dinner consisted of a meaty stew, though there was bits of root and a brownish nut diced inside. Whatever it was, it more than did the trick - Jhakor felt himself re-invigorated somewhat, the energy bolstering him for long enough to hear the man out. And the Paladin’s new(?) companion was certainly in the mood to do so.

“Your work’s the stuff I don’t envy,” he began. “But I’d argue mine takes more

preparation by far. A day before you were summoned, I knew you were leaving. You have a damnable habit of noticing me when I'm around, so I kept my distance. I have access to everything, really...and rather than not get around!" Jhakor settled down against a log, sensing some length to the story the man was about to tell, prompting lightly before he got too much further, "Name?" But the man waved it off, "Just call me by my identifier. Sign it on my mail, so it's good enough for you - I'm Jay. Nice to meet you and all. Now, if you're ready to hear me out?" Jhakor solemnly nodded, though he took the chance afforded to him by Jay owlishly peering at him over the fireplace. Even in the dimming light, he could see the man beneath the cloak was roughly his age, his face seeming utterly unremarkable in every way. Brown eyes, brown hair ending just above his eyebrows, no scars. Nose and lips were average, as was his height and build - in fact, there was truly nothing remarkable at all about this person at all. Perplexed, Jhakor abandoned his brief once-over and forced himself to listen again; Jay took this shift in sitting to indicate he should continue, and so he did. "I copied your hand-writing. Simple enough, a little curl on the 'el's and you drag the dot on your 'i's. So you've got a stockpile of letters to be sent home by the guildmaster so they don't suspect anything. Your parents, I mean. And as for the rest of your little group back home? They were told you went home to take care of an ailing mother. I really do think of everything, after all." He gave a thin-lipped smile at that and nodded towards the Paladin's drooping eyelids. "Ah, tuckered out. That's fair- how about this. We'll keep walking tomorrow, head for THEIR dock. I don't think I can - or want to - work Frank's ship, so we'll swipe one of theirs and sail home. For now? No need for watch, I've got it taken care of. You just...rest, alright?" Despite himself, and the man's damnable difficulty to be read, Jhakor fancied there was a trace of concern there. He nodded drowsily and, still clad in Syvelium's armor, and fell gracelessly asleep.

His dreams that night were less than pleasant - truly understandable, really. When he woke in the morning, he felt as if he had hardly slept at all, eyes slightly swollen feeling with fatigue, the bright morning sunlight beaming through the trees to reach his eyes like sharp knives. Groaning, hand raising to his face, he started to sit up and immediately realization washed over him. There was no more Frank, no more Jen. Not even his falcon to keep him company. All motions to sit up ceased and he instead flopped back down onto his bedroll, eyes shut tightly. Jay was nowhere in sight - that didn't mean he wasn't nearby, of course, but he wasn't visible. And so Jhakor allowed his guard to drop somewhat, freely allowing the grief that had built up to wash over him. It would be in poor taste to claim he was wracked with sobs or wept openly, but the man did break down somewhat. Having not had proper time to mourn his lost falcon and his two dead friends - for he had truly considered them such - he took it now, in the early morning, while Jay was gone tending to some task or other to do so. It felt too much, in a way; he had never had to cope with the death of his friends. He had killed, and had allies injured in combat, and even seen a few nameless guards slain under his watch. Each had burned him, left an impression in some way, but he had never experienced true loss on this scale. A sixty-six percent casualty rate on a mission was better than had been projected, everyone seemed to think this was a suicide mission, but some part of him had steadfastly believed in their survival. That they would return as friends, his imaginary future conveniently glossing over Frank's less-than-savory skills as he pictured them all being hailed as heroes, with himself returned to Anah whole and healthy. Instead, he was left with bodies, the axes he had collected, and one of Jen's axes. He had left her favorites behind, along with her spear and her armor, presuming that the fire that Jay had built would serve as a suitable funeral pyre for her as well.

He had likewise collected a locket of her hair, which was bundled in some spare cloth Jay had with him - "For a lover she may have had," he explained. These things were resting in the bag beside him as he mourned, their proximity offering only mild comforts to his internal aches.

Jay returned loudly - far louder than was necessary - giving Jhakor ample time to compose himself. Visibly sympathetic in the light, the man slung off the corpse of a freshly-slain deer, beginning to skin it. "Breakfast," he offered, tone cheery. "Sorry you slept poorly, but it's over now. The hard part's over, now you just survive." Flashing Jhakor a quick smile, he suggested, "You just go on home to Anah now, and the Eight. Take cushy patrols for awhile. I know it's awful right now, but being back safe and sound? That'll do you right." As he spoke, a dirk had practically appeared in his hand, deftly skinning the deer. Cleaned at a quick pace, Jhakor wasn't even able to properly identify what it was that had killed it - for all he knew, the man just snuck up on it and talked it to death. That did seem to be a common theme with him, the talking. And talk more he did, all the while the meat was drying or cooking: "Where was I? Something about...ah, right. So, your excuses in the mail, the old man wasn't through with me, it seemed. After I snagged Anah for you - er. Against regulation, actually. I guess I misheard!" He didn't sound very sorry at all, still grinning faintly, "He decided I should come with you. Protective old goat, really. A softy, and he's got a weak spot for you in particular. Think you're his favorite," Jay confided, prodding at the meat with his knife in an attempt to somehow hasten it on its way to cooking. Jhakor felt tired again just by listening to the man talk, his words dropping from his lips at an almost inhuman rate, the energy behind his storytelling an exhausting spectacle; timing is always the hardest part of a story. "So, I had to sneak aboard the ship. He told me to watch, not help - your quest and all. But, you passed the quest as it were, so I

saw no need to let you get incinerated.” His expression tightened a bit here, and he paused. “Am sorry about Frank though. Except for being a horrific monster, necromancer and something of a prick, I did like listening to him talk. I would have shot sooner, but I didn’t know who you were going to choose. And with only one bolt...” Here the story seemed to end again as Jay got distracted by his own musings, shrugging. “Breakfast’s ready,” he announced, stirring Jhakor from his half-doze with the prospect of food. “Eat up, then we march. For forever, really!”

Jay could cook to an acceptable degree, and the freshly-killed deer was once again mixed with some sort of root and nut, both of which tasted increasingly familiar to Jhakor. He felt himself more awake and alert after eating too, though it was only a small respite against the utter bone-chilling tired that threatened to consume him. Still, stubborn as always, he and Jay packed up camp after an hour of eating and making small-talk and set out on their way, Jhakor trudging along behind Jay as they wound through what passed for a path in the jungle. Quite peaceful now, and apparently without threat of being attacked or threatened, he did manage to find some comfort in the beautiful surroundings. Flowers were blooming, pinks and purples and even the rarer oranges, green vines roping around lush trees, undergrowth vibrant and alive. It wasn’t a city, it wasn’t what he was used to, but he lost himself briefly in wonder - perhaps beginning to comprehend what drives a Sentinel to fight so hard to protect it all. Still, the thought of the wilds brought back memories of Jen, a sense of resentment and betrayal starting to creep in amidst the grief for his friends. She had started it, really - she was the true ‘evil’ one. Frank’s methods were poor, but he conducted himself with honor for the most part. Jen however-- His musings were cut off as Jay turned and slapped a hand on his shoulder, seeming to have almost read his mind. “You’re someplace dark, kid,” he chided lightly. “Best to just keep enjoying the view and keep

walking. Friends were your friends, remember the good and forgive the bad. C'mon.” With that abrupt interrupt to his thoughts, Jhakor forced himself to allow his mind to wander elsewhere - particularly on Lady Anah and the potential of being home. There was still this walk ahead, and then two months of sailing, but at least it was something. A hope at the end of the tunnel, so to speak; a particularly beautiful hope, truth be told. Her charm wrapped around his hand and kept within his gauntlet, each swing of his hand reminded him of her promise to wait on him to return.

They made better time than the trio had - following to the path and not having to deal with being chased, no stopping to make sure no one was ahead, and not having to sneak onto the island itself meant that they were able to find the docks before nightfall of the second day of being outside of the volcano once more. Boldly, Jay strolled right up to the first building and opened the door. The entire place was deserted. He gave a grin and a sweep of his hand, offering grandly, “Take your pick. They’re yours - I don’t need a boat, and it seems you’ve captured quite a few of them.” He chuckled at his own joke and stepped abruptly, doing that odd thing where he ceased to be there or anywhere else after a few steps; Jhakor found Jay vanishing like that rather got on his nerves. Shaking off the irritation, Jhakor moved down the row of ships, considering each from the outside. Most were larger vessels, captured from pirates or traders, far too big to manage the two-man crew they were working with. But there, nestled among the titans, was a small, nimble cutter. It boasted only a one-room cabin, a single mast, and only a handful of oar slots, with no weapons on it. Defenseless was not something Jhakor liked, but it was otherwise perfect. Jay re-appeared with a few scrolls clutched under his arm, explaining them as maps and charts, looted from the various cabins and buildings. “This your choice, then?” he asked of Jhakor, eyeing the boat, “It’s certainly not Frank’s, but then, my skin crawls less at the thought of

being trapped on something like that. No rowing arms or anything!” He didn’t ever seem to wait for Jhakor to respond, simply replying to whatever imaginary dialogue he was having with himself in his head instead. Still, his dialogues tended to be right and Jhakor nodded - redundantly - and moved to board the ship as well. A quick stock of the cargo hold and the cabin revealed it was freshly stocked with food, prepared to sail more or less. “All of them are,” Jay explained to Jhakor abruptly, without being asked. “They were going to sail out and take over the islands one at a time. I rather think you selected the one they were going to put the demoness on - look!” He gestured towards an opulent chair fixed firmly to the prow of the ship, diamonds and pearls fixed grandly into the gilded gold frame. “Fancy, huh?” Jay managed, but nothing more - Jhakor stalked over to it and, with a series of short, abrupt swings, severed the legs of the chair and hurled the gaudy thing overboard. “Fuck her. Mine now,” Jhakor half-growled, abruptly touchy at the mention of the she-demon. Echoing in his mind, brought up again by Jay’s comment about her, was her final words: “Never happy again”. For Jen, she had been right in her own twisted way. What, then, for him?

The ship was ready to sail almost immediately, with Jay offering to take the first few watches and set the course. “I can sail, sort of,” he explained, unfurling a very stubby-looking eyeglass. “Funny what that old Ankyrean will sell you, if you know what to ask for.” He didn’t bother explaining what it did, simply holding it up to his eye for a moment and peering around. Rudder then immediately set towards some point, he unfurled the sails and bounded along the starbord side, hacking away ropes. “Away we go! And away you go too. You look like something the rojalli dragged in- sleep for a day or two. I’m used to staying up for ages. I’ll tell you the rest of the story too, when you wake next!” Jhakor wanted to argue with him, he really did. Jay could

see it in his eyes too. But Jay was also not a gambling man - the stores had been sampled by the pair before they had prepared to set sail, and Jay knew something Jhakor didn't: the few biscuits he had eaten hadn't exactly been 'clean', each laced with a subtle dose of delphinium. So Jhakor's arguing devolved into tired grumbling, and he stumbled into the cabin, flopped into the bed, and fell asleep atop the covers, still even in his armor. With a small laugh and a shake of his head, Jay smugly leaned against the mast and watched the island begin to disappear behind them.

When he woke up, he was pissed. Which Jay had expected, really - and planned for, naturally. "I know, I know. I shouldn't have poisoned you!" Jay interjected before Jhakor could get in a word. "But you were tired, grumpy, and not sleeping. So I gave you the old Spirean Nap, and let you heal. Because I didn't think you would." Then, pushing his luck, "You're welcome, really. No big deal." This earned him a solid thunk on the shoulder from a still-groggy Jhakor, who retorted, "Old enough to decide. Let me get a word in sometime too, maybe?" He thunked down cross-legged on the deck, longswords stowed away and Syvelium's armor as well. Instead, he wore a loose leather jerkin and leggings, Frank's axes strapped to his belt. "You owe me a story," he prompted, cutting Jay off from whatever retort he had worked up. The prospect of getting to talk a lot immediately distracted the Syssin from his argument and he nodded eagerly. "Yes, yes of course. So, he sent me to stow away. First thing I did was rummage for supplies; I had my bag with me, but that's emergency stuff. And varied enough to get me to a place I can get more supplies. I mean, it's just a small thing-- you know what, nevermind. I stole a crossbow and some bolts, blamed it on the crew, and I'm not apologizing." He swiped at the back of Jhakor's head, hand brushing through the hair in a faintly condescending gesture, as if placating a child, "I do know how some of you self-righteous types get." Then, dismissing it, he rambled on, "Once

aboard, I lurked around your room some. You, uh, actually barricaded me in, at one point. But we'll get to that! When Frank and Jen set aboard, everyone was too busy to notice me, swiping food and whatever else I felt like." The memory of himself skulking about and stealing food and supplies was still clearly a smug point, but all it did for Jhakor was remind him of how the trip had started, and of his loss once more. A faint wince overtook Jay and he quickly reached into a pouch, "By the way. I forgot- here. This is for you." In the man's hand, offered carefully out to Jhakor, was a single feather. "Was one of hers. All of her I could get before they carried her off," he almost whispered, "Stole it right out from under their noses, but didn't have time for much else. Had to stay close to you and all..." Jhakor accepted the feather immediately, fighting back tears yet again - his beloved falcon. A single feather was all that was left of her. Immediately embarrassed, he mumbled his thanks and tucked it away. Jay waved both the thanks and the embarrassment, "It's what makes you guys so good," he supposed. "Being able to care all the time. Like big kids swinging swords - you'd not be half the heroes if you were just tough monsters, right?" He ruffled Jhakor's hair again, seeming to have decided to treat him like a child despite being roughly the same age, and said, "I'm going to go sleep now. Just keep us where we're going, shout if something shows up, try not to fall asleep yourself- suppose if you do, no great loss. I've been up for far longer than I should've been, and I am mortal still, I guess." The Paladin was glad to have some quiet time, and immediately agreed, "I've got things out here, Jay. Go get some rest, we can keep on with your story later." He glanced up towards the man, only to find he was already gone. He snorted and scowled - that really was going to take getting used to.

Jay slept for a day and a half. Jhakor kept track, marking the hours by scratching a small

tally into the wood of the boat. During that time, Jhakor himself fell asleep twice, napping for a few hours each time. It was boring, just sitting there sailing, and he soon ran out of things to do to amuse himself. No one to make conversation with, no falcons to watch soar (a twinge of sadness again at the thought) and no fishing - boredom was going to kill him as surely as a blade might have. So it was with great relief that he heard a small shift of cloth from behind him, the Syssin once more leaning against the mast, stifling a yawn. "Guess I needed some real beauty-sleep," Jay suggested, "You could have woken me up. Where the Pit are we?" Again the spyglass came out, flicking around. And again he darted back, adjusting the path of the ship to some random-seeming direction, a nearly twenty-degree turn to starboard this time, and he returned to the mast where Jhakor was. "More story? Or do you need sleep?" The knight wrinkled his nose and quickly suggested, "Story. I'm not tired just yet."

"So. I stole the gear I needed from you all, set myself up in the one place no one looked - that damnable oar room. Front and to the right, I had my cache. I knew you wouldn't look there, Jen hated the place, Frank didn't care to go down there, and the animals couldn't smell me over the rot. It was hellish, and you'd better appreciate me for it!" Jay kicked lightly at Jhakor's back in a less-than-gentle nudge, then moved on with his story, "So, there I stayed until the pirates attacked. I was bored, and miserable, and I /hated/ that room. I snuck upstairs when I heard the explosion, and tried to get involved in the melee." For once, Jhakor saw something he never saw afterwards: the man looked positively embarrassed. "Fell overboard, the stupid lemming got me. Stepped on its tail and it shrieked, which scared the shit out of me, and I lurched over. Caught myself with a clever little rope tool I made, and ended up splashing down at the other end of it. Took me the better part of the fight to climb back up, and then I was back down to my hidey-

hole again.” Despite himself, Jhakor laughed, “I knew you were there after that. Or...someone. Nobody else believed me - the rail was wet. Not blood, water. I spent a day looking for you.” Jay gave a curt nod, “Aye, clumsy me. Didn’t happen again!” There was a pause and, quite proud of himself, Jay announced, “Didn’t hear any complaints when I saved you from that monster though. Hit every eye before the thing could blink, sent it running scared. Laughed myself silly - well, a giggle-fit, really - when Frank and Jen tried to claim credit for the kill. But I ran myself mostly out of ammo, and that was stupid- couldn’t steal more without attracting attention!”

Jhakor groaned and rolled his eyes, peering up at the man, “You talking like you do absolutely wears me out.” He started for his feet, adding on, “I’m going to go to bed. Your turn to watch- finish the tale tomorrow. Then figure something to bide our time with the whole rest of the way back.” “Month!” a voice called after Jhakor, “We’re sailing with the wind, not rowing! Month tops!” The Paladin paused at the doorway and looked back, lips twitching in visible amusement - in a good mood for the first time in a long while, “Believe it when I see it. Good night, Jay.”

Unlike Jay, Jhakor didn’t sleep for a day. Disciplined, he actually found himself slipping back into the habitual sleep cycle of keeping watch - waking up after only a few hours of sleep and unable to fall back asleep. So, he slipped out of the bed in the cabin, tidied up, and made his way back onto the deck. Visibly fatigued still, he plunked down in his normal spot sitting against the mast, Jay still leaning against it in more or less the same spot as when Jhakor left. “You’re awake quick,” the Syssin noted, amused. “Guess there’s two kinds of people on this boat...” This got an eye-roll from Jhakor, and a nod, “Aye,” the Paladin agreed. “Let’s go on with the story?”

Guessing we're almost done." Jay gave a nod of assent and launched on to finish his story, not needing to be told twice to talk more: "So once we landed, while you three were taking your sweet time, I did leave you. I wasn't supposed to, but I figured after everything you all had been through, you could deal well enough with whatever you found. I went and actually located here first - stuck to the trees so I could see better than on the ground, and scouted out all the boats and people. Checked back with you all every night - I do move pretty quick when I'm of a mind to! - and then went wandering the next day. It was nice, after being on that stupid boat so long, to be able to stretch my legs. And the patrols were pretty easy to slip by as well! So I actually made it to the gate a full day ahead of you guys. I didn't get to go inside though, couldn't quite blend in. You all were really clever with how you used those cloaks; gambles are only stupid when they don't work!" Jhakor wryly nodded and dug a piece of dried meat from a nearby crate, setting to chew on it. "I thought you said your story was almost done," he lightly grumbled, "And you're still yapping on and on." The Syssin scoffed arrogantly, "You're going to complain? Have somewhere else to be, is it?" Still, seeming to get the point, though he grumbled about the lost art of storytelling for a moment before complying, Jay concluded pretty quickly, "Left you again when you guys scattered - had to wait for the group to pass. Caught back up to you when you left the armory and tailed you afterwards. I would have helped with the necromancer, but no clear shot." He shrugged and then pointedly chirped down to Jhakor, "Done reporting, Sir. I'd ask for permission to be dismissed, but I don't like swimming."

With the story complete, the two didn't have very much to talk about. So they sat in silence for some time, each lost in their own thoughts, with the Syssin occasionally using his eyeglass to adjust their course. The days passed comfortably as there was little work to do, idle

chit-chat made and lots of sleeping. Jhakor felt the hurt of losing his friends fade some as time went on, no longer such a sharp ache; the proximity of Anah's trinket, still worn around his hand beneath some gloves, was a constant comfort and reminder that he was almost home. Four-fifths of a month passed before Jay started up a watch - they were only slightly behind schedule, the weather had been perfect, but now they were entering regularly traveled waters. "We need to make sure we don't get snuck up on," he had insisted. "I can handle anything if I see it coming!" And so, in four-hour rotations, each man stood guard on the deck, for the small ship had no crow's nest in the mast. During Jhakor's watches, he would sit and watch the sky, wondering if they were close enough yet to be seeing the same clouds as home. Despite himself, despite trying to stay calm and focused, he could always feel his pace quickening at the thought of being back in Enorian, where he belonged. He fully planned to ask for some time off to recover; perhaps properly try to court Anah, maybe go visit home. Thinking of any of these things never failed to put a small, sappy smile on his lips, and made the watch all the more bearable. For Jay's part, watch was a strange ordeal. Jhakor had stayed up once to watch. Even the Syssin's powers of detection weren't omnipotent, and he hadn't noticed the Paladin eavesdropping from the keyhole of the closed cabin door. The man was filled to the brim with energy, and he seemed to take to low songs to keep himself amused as he paced across the deck. They were no songs Jhakor had ever heard though, and the words drifting over mentioned names that sounded familiar and many places - Dun Fortress, the Caverns of Mor, and a few others. Resolving it to be just another oddity, he continued to watch with clear amusement as Jay would make his rounds - pace around the deck three times, then swing into the mast seemingly for the hell of it, dropping down someplace randomly and continuing his circling as if nothing had happened, singing all the while. He lost track of how long he watched for, but finally he gave up and moved to sleep for

the remainder of his time off, quietly amused.

Despite their watching, the return was entirely uneventful. One month and ten days (“I’m good, but not /perfect/,” Jay had grumbled) had passed, and they found themselves in sight of Enorian’s dock. The ship sailed smoothly into the harbor, but was immediately challenged; a large ship, what appeared to have once been a merchant vessel, was positioned by the entrance, a ballista pointed at them, “Who are you, and what do you want?” a voice called out. Jay turned and guided the cutter towards them, but there was a panicked shout, “Close enough! Stop there, stop there!” Clearly not accustomed to dealing with ships, and the cutter without an anchor, Jay rolled his eyes and set to performing tight, neat circles in front of the guard ship to get them to quit screeching. “Fine! We’re a Paladin and his Squire, returning from a quest. Sir Jhakor’s back,” he called out, then hissed lower, “Go stand on the front thing, where they can see you.” With a small nod, Jhakor moved to stand on the ‘front thing’ of the boat, offering a small little wave to the ship. Immediately, everyone aboard the other ship seemed to relax, “Sir! Trouble, but we’ll let your guild fill you in. Go on ahead, and glad to have you back.” This didn’t bode well, and neither Jay nor Jhakor were pleased with the heightened security and not knowing what was going on. Jay took the ship out of its looping and sailed forward into the harbor, docking it swiftly. The harbor-master approached as the pair stepped down the gangplank double-quick, leaving most of the supplies onboard. He took one glance towards Jay and rolled his eyes, cracking open the logbook and scribbling down something in imperfect handwriting; Jhakor couldn’t read it as he walked past and glanced. By the way Jay dropped some coins into the book as he went, maybe that was the point.

Jhakor kept his head down as he went and his cloak wrapped tight around Syvelium's armor, which he had donned for his home-coming, not particularly keen to be recognized just yet - mostly, he wanted to get home and find out what in the Pit was going on. Beside him was Jay, not bothering to sneak along, keeping pace with Jhakor's long-legged strides with dogged determination. Both men were grim, the city around them seemed preparing for war - in an upheaval, there were people and guards everywhere. It took them but a few moments to make it to the Paladin guildhall, saluting the gate-keeper - who seemed shocked to see Jhakor - and stepped inside quickly. Ta'lionu was the first to spot Jhakor, his mouth dropping open in shock. "You're back!" he marveled. "We thought you were in Ashtan when it fell. How-" He was cut off by Jhakor demanding, "What?! I wasn't in Ashtan. It's a long story, I'll tell you later. For now, what's going on?" "You mean you don't know?" the other knight asked, eyebrows raising, "We're being invaded. Ashtan was occupied, we're scrambling to get information, whatever we can. It's truly madness." Then, the man gave Jhakor a sympathetic wince. "Come with me," he said quietly, making his way deeper into the tower. Jhakor followed after, curious, as did Jay. The three went some way, finally halting outside, in a rarely-used garden. "Jhakor, I'm sorry," Ta'lionu began. "I...truly am. I didn't want to have to be the one to tell you this - your mentor fell in the first of the fighting." He gestured towards a small, simple gravestone. "There was nothing indicating you left for leave, either. We didn't know if you had deserted, or if you were gone on a special mission, or if you were dead. I just chose to believe the paperwork was lost." Firmly, he added as he clasped Jhakor on the shoulder, stalling for time to avoid telling him something else, "You're not the type." Jhakor's eyes shut tightly and he nodded, struggling to compose himself. Here, even once home from his damnable quest, there was loss and more war. Jay wasn't patient, as usual, "What else happened?" he demanded of Ta'lionu, "You're acting like a kid who got

caught with his hand in the cookie jar.” His eyes narrowed suspiciously, watching the knight for a moment. Grimly, Ta’lionu nodded and turned, indicating a series of gravestones. “We tried, Jhakor,” he half-whispered. “We did. But there were too many, and we had to retreat. Some of the newer members were killed. The Eight survived, but...Lady Anah did not.”

The world stopped then, for Jhakor. His eyes opened, he could feel nothing, hear nothing, smell nothing. The hand on his shoulder stopped existing, as did Ta’lionu’s pitiful attempt at explaining. Jay sat there dumbly, or may have talked for all Jhakor knew - he was deaf, senseless and numb in that moment. He paced a few steps away from the men and crouched down before her tombstone, left hand shakily peeling away the glove of his right hand, raising that hand to touch against its smooth surface. He traced the engraving of her name, willing it again and again to be someone else’s. Some mistake. Maybe it was he who had died, or Ta’lionu, or anyone else. It wasn’t fair of him, of course, but grief never is fair - he wished for anyone else’s name to be on that stone but hers. In an instant, all the fight, all the fury, all the joy and worry and pride and everything else he had was leached out of him. Cold, alone, miserable, the demon’s final taunt rang true in his ears, “Never happy again.” Was it a curse? A prediction? Or perhaps she had truly been able to read his fate from his face. Whatever the reason, he thought bitterly, the bitch was right. Had been right all along. He should have just let her kill him then and there and been done with it. But there was still work to do - there was always work to do. He pulled off his other glove and considered the trinket on his hand, her “good luck charm” she had called it. How he longed for her to have kept it and survived, rather than him. He lifted it to his lips and placed a small kiss on it, then tucked it carefully back into a pouch at his hip. “I need to go,” he rasped out, moving past the other knight and the Syssin as if they weren’t even there. “I have to go

home.”

Jay was right behind him as he walked down the hall, finally catching up and thudding a hand onto his shoulder. “Hey. Ship’s yours, Jhakor. Take it to sail home and here, this too.” He pressed a spyglass into his hand, promising, “Point it ahead and it’ll tell you where you’re going. Just focus, sometimes it’s a little shoddy.” Then, he added with a frown, stepping back, “I think this is the last time I’m going to see you, buddy.” His hand poked out and he murmured, “I know you are probably not in the mood for another goodbye, so this won’t be one- just take care. And it was an honor getting to know you.” Jhakor nodded once, dully, and shook the offered hand. Then he seemed to think of something. “Here. Take- I kept a journal of the trip. Keep it safe for me?” Jhakor asked, and then without waiting to see the reply, he turned and swept away again, still wearing Syvelium’s armor.

The ship was apparently easy enough for one man to crew, for it set immediate sail for Ashtan, loaded down still with the provisions from the journey back. The harbormaster’s note indicated only that the, “Mprhgrhp” had docked for a few hours then set sail again, with the name of the ship owner mysteriously missing. That was the last anyone in Enorian ever saw of him, or the ship, ever again.

Epilogue:

And that was the last I saw of Jhakor as well, just as I had guessed. Reports do put him somewhere on Ollin. One day I intend to go looking for him, but old bones and rumors do not a

particularly exciting adventure make, and he may not even remember me. Years passed, Ashtan sank, countless died and the world moved on. This story isn't really about me, but you'll have to forgive me for giving into my youthful habits once more, and make things somewhat about me still. Just a bit. I had no intention of ever releasing the contents of his journal, though I did attempt to compile as much information as I could about what few things I missed. He told me to keep it safe, and I did, and I plan to continue doing so; for years I looked for him. That was the last order I was given, after all: "Keep Jhakor safe". I would never have written this at all, truth be told, had it not been for a visitor I got last winter. I keep to habits, nowadays. In my youth I was paranoid of my paranoia, but now I've settled and gotten old, and found I don't much care. Visit the same bars every night, enjoy the drink and the company as much as I'm able. This night, I was settled down in a booth in the corner of a crowded bar on the beach, enjoying my mug and crowd-watching, when a hooded figure slipped into the bar. He found his way straightaway to where I was seated, and to my surprise he dropped a book - then a bag of coins - down on the table. He had my attention. He tugged his hood back, the scarred, faded-looking Kelki peering down at me. If he had been a human, I suppose he would have been grey-haired like me, but his head-tentacles weren't any help in determining age. "Tell the story," he had told me, "Just make sure you get it right." And with that, he he turned and stalked back out of the bar. A casual acquaintance I keep for just these sort of circumstances informed me later that he left town, boarded a ship flying no flags somewhere out of view of the town, and sailed away into the night. And so, I smiled and nodded, cracked open the book and pocketed the coins - and knew immediately I should write this story. I won't mention my name, those parties who need to find me will find me or already have. And as for the rest of you, why, I imagine it doesn't matter in the slightest if you know who I am or not. And so, I simply leave you with this, my thanks: to

those who contributed their books, time and knowledge to helping me write this story. To Jhakor, Jen and Frank for their bravery and serving gloriously as unsung heroes in their own right. And to me, for spinning such a glorious tale. Thank you, my readers, for humoring an old man.

In Eternal Service,

- J