

IV

The unmistakable clatter of bone against wood greeted Arrehp on his return, two equally insomniac mariners having taken up the unyielding, cold surface he'd called a bed just minutes prior. A swift flicker of gray pelt: the dice rolled again between the twain hunched figures, scarcely a whisper exchanged before going again, then again. At the sight of each loss and each win, the sunken, wolven eyes hardly widened, if at all, unimpressed and uncaring. Having now spoken to one of their lot-- though the white wolf denied it-- Arrehp could not help but wonder at the stories behind those masks, shelved away for merrier nights.

Not quite desirous of any further commotion, the human stole away as silently as he'd arrived, creeping back along the aisle. He found an empty bench near the galley's midsection, nearer the wolf whose name he'dn't even remembered to ask, than the gamblers. He scanned over the tops of the mounds of sickly canvas in the supposedly compatriotic wolf's direction, but the canid seemed to have taken his own advice and returned to restless slumber, no singing haunting the air any longer.

Arrehp scolded himself internally. What care had he for that dog now other than never to see him or any such creatures ever again in his life? He wrapped the scratchy covering he found abandoned there around himself in some effort to soften the bench's uneven planks as they sought to dig into his back.

Above, a lateen snapped taut in the wind as onward the galley continued her voyage, groaning like a living thing, and timbers straining against the coming swell. Arrehp curled tighter, tucking his hands between his knees. He poked his nose out from beneath the raggedy cloak, once more sniffing at the wind as the wolf'd done: nothing but the too familiar sting of brine in air. Then, all the ship's whining seemed to fade beneath the rising hiss of waves against hull. An odd tranquility befell him as that soothing sound drowned all the rest, rocking to and fro like a baby in a cradle on that bench.

And in that strange calmness, true rest knocked at the door-- if only for a moment, eftsoons the boy's mind began to wander in that realm between wakefulness and slumber. Something cracked: that shell he'd formed around him. And fighting through those cracks: old Arrehp, the farm boy, the same whom he thought'd died-- whom he hoped'd died. He hadn't wept since the first few nights, and even still he didn't weep anymore than he sobbed softly, but a tear or two soaking the fabric shroud. And thus he was perturbed by visions of yellow eyes beset by white. And that tenor voice echoed, telling of two years before the mast, and how disturbed was he by the terrible thought of the years of the others. And how it all stung and drove away the caress of sweet sleep in that hypnagogic limbo. And how he hated them: the furred beasts who'd done this to him.

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Still, restless dreams slipped through wherein he witnessed the deck as a ghost, and felt glee at the sight of those mangy white-furred officers scrambling about like ants, faces painted in anguish. He did not know what for, but he cackled in his sleep at the vision of them even slipping in their haste, their fine linens sullied by the sludge below. They yanked on the lines, the yards swinging to and fro, positioned one way only for some frantic yell to order they be set contrarily. In this way, they seemed to be struggling to tack the ship onward, northward. He watched as the sails were reefed, furling tighter and tighter until they were drawn up wholly to the yards. Then, a terrifying sound crept in, even louder than the swell, the wind practically screaming as if to tear him from the dream. And the stars were blotted out almost fantastically, swallowed up one by one by some black specter. Then the rain began to pour in violent torrents without even a warning drizzle.

Even in his ethereal form, he felt it: the chilly sting of sleet and drafts no cloth could halter. But it was the clangor of the helm's bell and the cracking of the whips that tore him from the vision,

and flung him into a world too scarily similar to that which he'd just seen: canids and humans panicking about, ropes whipping through the air like serpents, and wind howling through the rigging. Aye, a tempest was upon them. Groggy Arrehp looked upward and, indeed, even the sky'd been dreadfully blackened as in the dream.

"Wesom! A bom wesom, manom ze syegza!" a wolven officer bellowed. Learned instinct cutting through the haze at the bark of the familiar command, Arrehp quickly emerged upright from the cocoon of canvas, hands shooting forth without a thought to latch onto the already-swinging oar, only for the crack of a whip to bite into the furred shoulder of the rower beside him along with a contradicting order, *"Abto! Abto!"*

It was addressed solely to port side. Through the thick crystalline gray of hail and fog, the boy glimpsed the poor rowers on starboard who continued to row furiously, and-- just beyond them-- the jagged maw of rocks inhabiting the lee shore. The cliffs seemed to lean hungrily towards them with each lurch of the galley as they fought for dear life to steer away, against wind and wave. Arrehp gazed upwards at the sails. Indeed, as in the dream, they'd been struck, the wind too chaotic and indecisive in its direction to be counted on in this peril.

"Lalog! Ab emtilog ze isezyato!"

Something about port and starboard, Arrehp managed to extract from the shout. He looked about, hands still firmly clenched around the oar if only to prevent the sea from slamming the shaft into his face. He noticed those that understood-- or at the least those that intuited that they should follow the ones that understood-- abandoning their posts at port to assist starboard, terribly understaffed in the wake of the haste with which the rowers'd been called from sleep. Glancing aftward, Arrehp was met by a dangerous glower from the helm and for the first time ever wished he belonged to the chained as he flowed along with the rest who were able to move.

For what felt like five minutes but must've been one, they pushed and pulled with all the might they could muster to the sprightly tempo of the drum, barely audible. Then, finally, having so laboriously pointed the bow windward, portside was commanded to join in the rowing out into sea. With awed terror, Arrehp watched as the rambade drove through crest after crest, defiantly parting the waves. This must have gone on for at least two hours, though it was hard to tell. Before too long, Arrehp felt hollow, arms driven mechanically via the vessel that was his body, possessed by the awful spirit that is adrenaline-- his own displaced and made to spectate-- and fueled by whatever meal he'd had over half a day prior. This was the fastest tempo to which he'd ever rowed thus far and already a handful of others'd dropped, though there was no time to do anything-- either foul or fair-- about them, many of the soldiers and even officers having been forced to join amongst the rowers' ranks. Instead, their bodies simply slid along the slickness of the deck with each sway of the ship.

Then, at long last, that beautiful order came again, addressed to starboard this time, *"Emtilog! Abto! Abto!"*

One or two more rowers dropped in that moment as all the starboard oars came to a sudden stop. Arrehp contemplated joining them on the deck, a dark vignette framing his vision as he panted, imitating the canids beside him in this manner, all of them savoring the sweet deluge which hadn't for a second ceased.

"Zembyerek ba veba sayog! I, starboard, gepagek bom oars! Iktekzekte Geikabza, zigiha ba..."

Arrehp looked around again almost instinctively at the sound of the two words he recognized. He noticed at least a few other humans doing likewise and even a few prick ears perked up. Whatever it was the officers continued crying faded away into the cascading drone of rain. Only bits and pieces came in as his head and body drooped in moments, upheld only by the oarshaft before him and, in turn, by the equally exhausted rowers beside him. The gray wolf to his right elbowed him-- whether gently or not he couldn't even tell, but rectified himself at the prod without the energy or will to respond.

The same white wolf that'd guided him aboard-- Quartermaster Geikabza, as he'd learned was her name-- stood perhaps thirty feet away, not far from the main mast, halfway down the bisecting aisle of the galley. The wide-brimmed leather hat atop her head dripped profusely, a veil of droplets haloing her head. Besides the tip of her snout, her face thus appeared dry. The countenance she bore upon it, severe as usual, was knit and wrinkled in some sort of frustrated confusion at the words ringing from the helm. That was among the few things that imprinted themselves in Arrehp's memory from that dizzy moment. She seemed about ready to bark back at the captain, but there was clearly no time in the midst of such a storm for disputing orders. So she spun around to face the bow and began relaying commands of her own as a few other white wolves-- they all looked the same to Arrehp, some male, some female-- took positions around the mast and tightly gripped the ropes. The dream echoed in Arrehp's mind, though now they were undoing their previous efforts by unfurling the main lateen, nor was there any humor now. Almost immediately, the ship jolted as the canvas snapped taut once more, leeward, yanking one of the wolves forward as she struggled to wrest control over the yard. The quartermaster shot an irritated look at the captain but eftsoons resumed her own orders in an attempt to right the sail to their advantage.

The captain continued, "... *wesek, tozom!*"

Arrehp's arms were yanked suddenly as the starboard oars once more stirred to life. Combined with portside's uninterrupted rowing, the pull of the sail had reoriented the ship northward, if slightly leeward. He almost wished the brief respite they'd been granted those two minutes or so'd never come as he resumed the ceaseless push and pull at the relentless rhythm of the helm drum, his body protesting as he struggled to return to that numbed, desensitized state. The temptation to simply collapse resurfaced, but he knew very well the deck'd likely be the last thing he'd ever witness, though-- at the same time-- that almost added to it. The formidable palisades they'd fought so long to sink into the thick of the fog tormented the human's mind in their threat to near again. So Arrehp felt as he poured out each ounce of effort he could in the hope of saving his own skin and that of his fellow countrymen aboard.

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For perhaps three hours, on they oared, though the tempo was thankfully reduced, the captain having decided there was sufficient distance from the lee shore to proceed northward and hopefully to harbor. On the one hand, the waves' ceaseless shower alongside the equally relentless rain were a blessing: welcome cold compared to the violent sun of most days prior. But now, despite all the rowing, Arrehp found himself miserably shivering as if the water'd seeped all the way through to the bone.

At least a few of the bodies-- whether alive or dead-- had washed off the deck altogether as the quartermaster and her team battled with the sail, which on a number of occasions had broken free from their control and levered the ship right into the tide, the galley thirstily gulping up the brine. Arrehp caught the increasingly furious glowers she aimed towards the captain each time. These culminated with a particularly fierce gale which finally managed to commandeer the yard from them, suddenly and violently swinging it in a murderous arc which raked clean through a bench row ahead. Some three reddened oarsmen flew overboard into the depths. The mangled cadavers-- or bodies soon to be-- of the others in that row sickeningly crumpled in place.

An officer hollered at port side, a handful of replacements ditching their posts there at the order. The quartermaster bounded for the whipping brace line, leaping over the other white wolf who now lay grimacing with her throat flat against the deck, muzzle pointed forward. Resembling a character from some legendary scene, the leather-hatted wolf snatched the slippery line out of the air, arresting the loose yardarm with some effort. Then, practically spitting at the wolf on the deck, "*Lyatgim! Bevaktate, dowa!*"

The other stirred slowly, planting her padded palms beside her against the wood, before painfully peeling herself from the deck with weary arms, the white fur and linen plastered so heavily by the salty water against her form. She all but crawled towards the quartermaster to seize the line once more, whereupon the latter redirected her yelling back towards the others working the sail, "*Awyek ba veba isezyatasekte! Awyek ba! Awyek ba!*"

"*Ko!*" from the helm-- from the captain-- the edge of some sort of desperate frustration tainting the angered bark, "*Iktekzekte, noktgobe ema veba i wemu-*"

"*Napitak!*" the quartermaster interrupted, her voice tearing through the storm's howl, "*Kom sataga a tozom!*"

Arrehp did not understand a word, but it was evident as he observed her assigned crew begin to strike the lateen once more, that the quartermaster was not willing to maintain the sail deployed in such weather any longer. The captain bared his pointed teeth, his snout wrinkling in some display of dominance, rebutting, "*Iktekzekte Geikabza, bo ne ame enivabe a uk sotik! Fabtak mobo ukam siyam. Saktekzges-*"

"*Ko! Ko! Ko! Saktekzgesom kaza! Nok tozo wempeto, napitak...*" Quartermaster Geikabza's furred hand reached for the saber at her side, resting on the hilt as her golden yellow eyes locked with the captain's, her expression something between a challenge and a plea. Then, addressing the crew behind her, "*... awyek ema sabzita veba!*"

For a second, Arrehp felt the oar falter as all eyes turned to witness the dispute between the two white wolves, a tense microcosm enveloping them even amidst the violence of the tempest threatening them all. The captain's muzzle wrinkled almost impossibly, indignantly. His ears, protruding through his own plumed hat, were now completely flattened and pointed rearward, as if resting upon the brim. A mountainous wave swelled and the weary ship whined as she rose then momentarily plummeted like a boulder down a hill, the remaining oars struggling to find purchase, unhelpt by the now-broken rhythm of the rowing. The captain's ears, drenched, tentatively returned to their erect position as he broke eye contact with the quartermaster to face the rowers. At the sight of their tired, curious gazes and the slowing oars, he seized the opportunity to reroute his fury from the defiant wolf woman who stood midship and towards the rest of the crew, "*Rumakom ikutibem, wesek! I...*"

His voice faltered as he turned to face the smaller crew manning the sail just beyond the quartermaster again, who were already desperately working to strike it. The drum had picked up the pace once more and the whips were revived to rectify the failing oarsmen. The captain's face flashed with some sort of renewed aggression, but he evaded Quartermaster Geikabza's unwavering stare, some pang of uncertainty, insecurity, or perhaps despair shadowing his visage as he addressed her team directly, "*... I awyek ba veba, nok pigima!*"

So the grueling rowing northward resumed, unassisted and unhindered by the ungovernable lateen. But the wicked wind and wave showed no sign of mercy. And the ship seemed to sleigh down the slopes of the tide with increasing violence. Arrehp wanted to die in moments, torn by the same terror and awe and anguish that impelled him to cry and yet continue even as his arms cramped, all for some forlorn love of life. The mariners and even the officers and quartermaster who'd warred with the sail dissolved amongst the benches, joining the lowly rowers in the dire effort.

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Another handful of hours passed after the sail had so catastrophically broken free and subsequently been stricken, a deathly muteness having befallen the ship. Naught was heard but the persistent beating of the drum, the breaking of water against oar, and the storm sound itself-- until a crash shook the ship: a heavy, wooden rumble as of a large mass striking another. It came again and again, rhythmically with each swell. The officers turned to look at the captain and the captain at the

officers, their lupine visages etched with some gaunt and ghastly expression of purest disbelief, as if their hearts had all collectively sunk to the very seabed below. All but Quartermaster Geikabza, who rose from her bench and marched aftward, her eyes once more locking with the captain's, whom Arrehp could've sworn cowered beneath her glare. There was an almost maternal disdain inscribed upon her countenance as she reached for a scuttle in the aisle to Arrehp's left and flung it wide open. Gazing inside as another thud reverberated through the galley, she braced herself with one leatherclad foot in anticipation of the ship's now-noticeable list.

"*Ai arua ek ba lozera i nagra muebta,*" she exclaimed at the captain over the stormy din. Then, without awaiting a response, she stomped towards Arrehp, yanking him off the oar and shoving him in the open hatch's direction. The human stumbled, slipping face-first onto the deck beside the opening with a pathetic, sobbing groan, eliciting an angered yell from the wolfess, "*Bevaktate! Bimo ze syegza!*"

That was the same word she'd spat at the other wolf when she'd fallen earlier and it wasn't too difficult for Arrehp to intuit that it must mean something along the lines of *get up*, followed by an insult or slur of some sort which he'd heard a number of times before. *Lest the stupid bitch kick me*, he thought as he lifted himself off the deck with an even greater pain than the other wolf she'd barked that to. That's when he managed to glimpse into the hold below and nearly froze, his jaw dropping in horror. A body of what must've been waist-high water sloshed about inside, a massive crate having broken free from its moorings. The debris of the smaller containers it'd already dashed to pieces splashed hazardingly around.

"*Setete aya alaho, eknuekta uka nuleta, i espyema a manag ek arua,*" Quartermaster Geikabza instructed with a relative calm, only to be met by the bewildered human's stupid, flat, horrified face. With an infuriated groan, she roared, "GO DOWN, FIND... BUCKET AND... UP BRING... WATER!"

The human flinched, nearly stumbling again at the almost bestial display of frustrated rage, the quartermaster's face having contorted into a fearsome approximation of a literal wolf ready to kill as she struggled with the translation. But before the boy could provoke her further, she spun away, dragging others from the rows and screaming commands, clearly incensed by the other officers'-- and especially the captain's-- inaction. Like a maw agape, the open scuttle beckoned maliciously for Arrehp to enter. And, trepidatiously, he did.

It was dark below and the water frigid. With a few trembling breaths, Arrehp adjusted himself, keeping his arms outstretched in an effort to both balance himself and ward off the splintered boards, bands, and nails floating around him. Not quite eager to move towards the unrestrained crate which'd been sighted from above, the human trudged in the opposite direction in search of a bucket, as instructed. Every step was a gamble against the unseen, his toes curling around slimy planks and dragging through the gritty ballast. He waded deeper into the gloom, the sloshing of his own movements blending into the eerie creaking of the hull, which echoed throughout. Then, he spotted it: an intact, iron-banded wooden pail, bobbing erratically near a pile of sodden canvas. He reached for it, his fingers slipping on the wet rim once before clamping down and pulling it towards him. Towing the vessel behind him, he cautiously made his way back towards the space beneath the gray, square light of the open hatch above.

Upon submerging the bucket to produce a heavy, full container, he paused, frozen by a sudden, paralyzing uncertainty. He stood there, chest heaving, clutching the rim of the pail before turning his face to the rain. His sight was greeted by the darkened silhouette of the same she-wolf that'd sent him below, and those glowing, yellow eyes. For the first time ever, he sympathized with the captain as their gazes met. He didn't know if he was supposed to climb out, or if he was meant to hoist the water up to her. That hesitation lasted only a second before a growl sounded and a white, clawed hand shot down through the scuttle, "Give! Fast!"

Arrehp offered up the pail, raising it above his head. Quartermaster Geikabza snatched the handle with a violent jerk, hoisting it up and out of view. In one fluid motion, she pivoted and thrust

the bucket into the arms of a mariner behind her, who, in turn, passed it down the line she'd assembled, until the water reached the gunwale to be returned to sea. Before the boy could even exhale, a second pail plummeted towards him, tumbling through the air then splashing into the water beside his hip, "Faster! Or us die!"



"The human flinched... at the almost bestial display of frustrated rage..."

Arrehp plunged the bucket and raised it for the chain of mariners to repeat the movement. Some part of him-- deep down-- thanked the quartermaster for robbing him even of the time to think. Had he that liberty, the Sisyphean nature of the task would likely have dealt the final blow to his will to continue, onto which he clung. One bucketful at a time, some six such chains, formed from the rowers, thusly labored to empty the hold.

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Perhaps another four or five hours passed. At any rate, enough time had elapsed for the sun's already dim, diffused glow to begin diminishing. The crew'd managed to reduce the hold's water to about knee level, at least. Arrehp had been lucky to dodge a barrel which, like the crate and other objects below, suddenly and violently found freedom. A few others who were sent down specifically

to secure the tumultuous cargo were not so. In particular, the boy could not pluck from his mind the still-clear image of one of the foxes from the rambade-- one of the soldiers whom he'd first seen distantly upon boarding all those ages ago-- whose face was forcefully made to resemble his own upon impingement between the hull and the crate. For as much as he'd grown to hate the beasts, he could find no glee in the thought of having one's snout crushed into their skull. He still floated below in the shallow, reddened water, so elegantly adorned by his crimsoned gambeson.

Above, the fog had receded somewhat, enough for the faint fires of a town to shine through. With most the cargo secured and half the flood expelled, the scuttles'd been shut and the rowers recalled to their benches, Arrehp included. The galley was sufficiently nimble again to maneuver against the tide. And it was paramount that such a maneuver be repeated, for though the fading of the fog had revealed the port town, it also parted for the jagged teeth of the blasted lee shore to glimmer malignantly once more.

Such a strange spirit seemed to fill the hearts of all aboard: an elation immediately dampened by the dread of death upon the rocks, but a hair's breadth from the destination towards which they'd so bloodily toiled for so long. Yet the thought alone of more rowing-- even if to save their lives-- haltered the motivation to close that final gap. Of the decimated body of sailors left, a large portion now merely stared blankly into the void, their arms limp and spent beside them. The oars splashed almost uselessly and arrhythmically to the irregular pulse of the drum. Arrehp was among these mariners, his idle eyes fixed upon the deck and jaw slackened by the same torpor. The wailing of the others faded to nothingness in his ears.

Even Quartermaster Geikabza hesitated a moment before shooting up and off the bench-- at the sight of which the captain rectified himself, the soggy plume of his hat appearing to do the same. Coming to his senses, he barked an order to the drummer, righting the rhythm. The lower officers stirred to life, in turn, one final time. Before long, the air was filled once more with their rallying cries. The whips cracked, though they seemed to be mostly aimed at the deck for fear of losing even a rower more. The quartermaster marched down the aisle, bellowing into the stunned oarsmen's ears. Her black, padded palm landed upon Arrehp's shoulder, forcefully rattling the fatigue-induced shock out of him, "Hello! Wake up! Hello! Wake up!"

Port side was ordered to stop, leaving only Arrehp and the rest of starboard to row again. They were performing the same maneuver from half a day ago, steering the bow of the galley windward to drive out to sea-- to put much-needed distance between themselves and the lee before the final stretch to harbor. Their rowing was set to the same desperate tempo of that morning: a war against the waves. But the ship was heavier, the oars tired, and their numbers lesser now.

This battle raged on for another hour. They managed to gain perhaps half a mile, but the rowers began to drop like flies, one by one, at an alarming rate. This time, Arrehp followed suit. But before he could sink into a deeper coma, a leatherbound paw prodded at his side, eftsoons his body was jerked upright by the same calloused pad that'd roused him from his stupor earlier. Quartermaster Geikabza didn't even bother uttering a word to him as she departed to effectively resuscitate the other continuously collapsing sailors. They could *not* afford to lose a single man or woman now.

Then another torturous half hour passed. Arrehp dared not look back at the rocks-- he was barely conscious enough to do so anyways. Try as he might, it was basically the oar itself that held him up. But the captain was. The remaining officers were. And they turned to look at the rocky shore. And they turned to look at each other, their white-furred faces somehow paler still: gaunt, gaunt-- and defeated, their hearts firmly anchored now into the sands below the brine. The captain reached for the brim of his hat, his pointed ears slipping through the holes as he removed it, whereupon they flattened once more, though not for any anger at a fellow wolf this time. Nay, his muzzle turned skyward, to face the very storm that'd put him here. He squeezed shut his lupine eyes, then he began to whisper, as if reciting poetry to Whomever was beyond those black clouds.

The galley had drifted leeward about a quarter mile. Quartermaster Geikabza turned to look at the captain and a flicker of something other than disapproval-- something almost pitying, something uncharacteristically soft-- shadowed her face for a second. But it was not long before the usual scowl readorned her snout. In an instant she was back to marching up and down the aisle, ordering the disarrayed oarsmen to row, faster, stronger. No doubt, if it were not an even more futile endeavor, she would have dragged the very captain down to the benches to add whatever ounce of manpower he could offer to the rapidly depleting reserve.

Arrehp felt as though his heart was on the very brink of exploding. Still, he mustered whatever strength he could through those intermittent pangs of adrenal rage into the oar. He yelled in a mixture of frustration and purest panic as if he alone could drive the ship across the sea and all the way back to Ienrrarg, all the way back into his mother's arms. The thought stung, spurring him on, and he projected that same image onto Quartermaster Geikabza. He could not fail her. Whatever delusion fueled her in that moment was the very same that fueled him, and nothing else.

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Time became ephemeral. Arrehp became a piston of meat and bone. His vision tunneled upon the mirage of his mother in the quartermaster. They could make it still, he was sure of it. His mother-- Geikabza-- turned to look at him with an inscrutable expression: one he'd never known yet felt so familiar-- a gramercy, a pardon, an apology, a hug-- all bundled in one.

No sooner had the poor farm boy felt the imagined warmth, than a sickening, guttural shudder vibrated through his very foundation. He was launched forward, his forehead meeting with the heavy oak of the bench ahead. A dull, wet thud extinguished the world, and darkness rushed in. The weightless void wherein he now drifted filtered the screams of the dying into something akin to distant gulls. He was a passenger in his own skin when the second strike came. The galley groaned, a long, agonized wail of twisting timber as her portside slammed into the same rocks that'd already shredded her stern. With a violent and sudden list, the deck became a slide. Arrehp's limp, unconscious form was tossed like a ragdoll off the planks and over the gunwale.

The icy chill of the Ienrrargian Sea swallowed him whole, biting into his flesh as if to suck out the little life left in him. The sensation tore him from one darkness to another, his eyes and mouth shooting wide open to the sting of the salt surrounding him, stabbing both at the globes in their sockets and-- worse-- at the inner walls of his lungs. He kicked and flailed, thrashing like a dying fish in an attempt to escape the suffocating blue, never having known the sea or any like body of water. Miraculously, his head broke the shimmering surface, the locks of his hair unhelpfully plastered down in a veil as he gasped with a horrid, choking agony.

The battered husk of the galley had been drawn back out to sea by the tide, which curled up into an angry mountain of brine, prepared to drive the useless vessel leeward again. In like manner, the receding water dragged away the boy, who continued to slap the surface in an effort to stay afloat. Then, with furious momentum, the sea rushed once more towards the unyielding black and gray of the cliffs. The rambade with its cannons, which once so valiantly split the waves, was now almost vengefully dashed against the rocks, thunderously shattering into a million pieces. Arrehp was narrowly missed by the ship and the same stony teeth that'd been her undoing. Instead, he was forced between two crags before the sea fetched him out again. He continued his kicking and flailing but could sense that-- like the rowing-- it was a losing battle wherein he was at the ocean's mercy. Frantically looking about for salvation: water, water everywhere, and all the boards did shrink into the black abyss, as did he.

Bubbles escaped his lips in a silver stream as he sank, panic seizing his chest, tightening his lungs until they burned anew. His thrashing did not cease, but the depths' cold pressure around him seemed to tighten with each futile movement. Like dark serpents, his hair trailed above him with the escaping air. The darkness with which he had fleetingly acquainted himself slowly returned, the

strangled agony giving way to a strange moment of bliss that impressed itself upon his sickly white face. Yet-- as twice before-- the human was violently torn from his deepening coma by a white-furred, black-padded hand, though this time the clawed digits clamped onto his hair, yanking him painfully towards the surface, where the acrid air awaited to revive him.

Thus reanimated, Arrehp's desperate writhing resumed, born of some misguided instinct. The burning in his scalp from the taut hairshafts was about all he felt besides the equally stinging cold and salt and the gagged gulps of air he was permitted as he was towed along by the wolf. This was perhaps for the best given how the human's limbs mindlessly sought for something to latch onto. Every few seconds, the churning glass reclaimed him, pulling him below, only for the powerful, clawed grip to wrestle him back from swirling sea's clutches. He couldn't see his savior from beneath the thick froth that coursed over his eyes, only the rhythmic splashing of more experienced limbs and the occasional glimpse of white fur drenched in whiter foam.

With another furious charge, the waves assaulted the palisades once more, the two mortals caught in between. Arrehp felt the wolf's swimming falter as they accelerated dangerously, followed by the screaming pain of his leg scraping against a crag as he was forced anew amidst the rocks. This time, the canid was there to anchor them with a clawed hand that dug into the shale, holding against the receding water's obsessive tug. As soon as the water calmed, the wading continued and the two dug themselves deeper in amongst the intimidating boulders surrounding them.

The oscillating waves struck again and, with a terrible force, the human felt his chest slam into a submerged ledge, crushing the little air in his lungs out along with some blood. He began to slip away, the darkness calling him back with a seductive, numb warmth. But the grip on his hair tightened with an equal ferocity, forbidding him from abandoning his reality, agonizing though it was. So he coughed and choked and gasped for air, tasting very little more than iron and brine as he fought for the sliver of life left in him.

The degraded linen of his shirt did very little to shield against the barnacled rock along which he was dragged, disintegrating beneath him as the wolf struggled to tuck them twain into a crevice which they could only pray'd absorb the bulk of the tide's brutality. Therein they clung for dear life as the ocean waged its war with the land all throughout the night, sending plumes of freezing spray uncountable feet high to meet with the sky. They drifted in and out of the restless slumber with which both were familiar, worsened by the deathly fatigue of the day prior and the mortal terror of the very rocks within which they found refuge. With a tremorous shudder, one would jolt awake for fear of sinking into a permanent sleep, the other for fear of his bloodied fingers losing traction, or simply to kick against the risen tide when it engulfed their legs, lest it should sweep them away towards a certain doom. Their breathing was an endless stream of ragged, wet wheezes, and the fur and cloth alike did naught to halter the biting cold.

Hours thus bled into an eternity of salt and shivering, the wolf and the human reduced by the singular, animal goal of drawing the next breath. The morning stars eventually bore witness to the miserable scene, peeking out of the receding, charcoal sky as the sun rose to greet them again like an old friend-- as if naught'd happened.