

THE WIZARD OF HARPER'S BAY

A Short Story by J.D. Delzer

A flood of water came through the door behind the bar at the Dancing Dragon Tavern. The water, sudsy and clean, flooded across the floor and swirled around towards the front door before flowing into the street. A scent of lavender and soapy suds remained in its wake, which left the wooden floorboards slick and damp.

"Gregory! What was that?" A curious, shrill voice from the top of the stairs called down. It belonged to the voice of Marianne DeLeuit, the co-owner of the tavern and wife of Gregory DeLeuit. "Did you flood the house again?"

Inside the kitchen in the back room of the tavern, water still dripped from the ceiling above a small well area and a pair of basins for washing glasses and baking pans. A soggy Gregory dripped from his stubble to his dusty brown boots. He wiped the soap from his eyes and tucked a green metal rod into his jerkin. With a sigh, he reached for a rag and wiped off his face.

"In the name of the king, Gregory!" Marianne stood at the fifth step from the floor, the lowest point upon the stairs which yet remained dry. She fought hard to keep her voice diplomatic. "This is the fourth time this week! Surely you can clean the tavern like a normal person?"

Gregory sloped his way across the room to the back bar. "Forgive me, dear. I know you don't approve of my methods."

"We open in an hour. We can't have muddy boot prints across the floor."

Gregory offered a smile. "How was your nap?"

Marianne adjusted her chemise. "Fine, dear. Those herbs that Harrion brought by have helped with the nausea."

Gregory came out from behind the bar and crossed the room, righting a chair before leaning upon the railing. "I'm sorry the morning sickness has been unpleasant."

"There is too much to be done here." She held up her skirt before daring to step on the damp floor. "Shall I get the mop then?"

"If we're to serve our neighbors tonight, they'll come for your famous potato stew, dear. It is my mess, I shall attend to it."

Marianne gave her husband a kiss. She took his hand and let his fingers slip away from hers as she passed, using her other hand to keep her skirt from getting wet across the floor.

Once she was out of earshot, he opened the front door to let more air in. To one side was the mop, along with a large bucket. "You will be taken care of in my absence, my love. I promise." He took the mop in hand and began to swab. "For now, my captain, I shall mop this deck as I did so long ago."

Within the hour, the scent of boiled potatoes and salt pork wafted into the hamlet of Harper's Bay, home to a thousand or so fishermen, bakers, farmers and traders. All were citizens of the nation of Dieteria, though few of the landlocked populace had visted the capitol of Davenport far to the north. Goods may have a long way to travel, but news moves quickly across the plains.

That night, two hundred patrons came through the door at the Dancing Dragon, a small house on the north edge of town just a stone's throw from Diamond Falls. Gregory worked the bar, pouring an ale that was the recipe of a friend. In addition, they also served a sweet tea that was brewed in their basement and served cold. Marianne worked the kitchen, serving up bowls

of potato stew and bread. Nobody knew where she got her yeast, but anyone who had broke bread in the Dancing Dragon said Marianne's bread was the best.

"Let me buy you a drink." Captain Jack Tate, a graying ship's captain from the north, slapped his palm against the bar. "Greg, I've said it many times, but I still say you've got the best ale this side of the Centra."

"Well thank you, Jack, that means a lot." Greg poured another ale and laid it down for another patron. "But you know I'm no drinker."

"And why? Harrion Lewis lets you sell his ale, rents you this house for dimes on the dictare, even stores your collection of maritime paraphernalia..."

Gregory gave him another ale. "I guess he thinks I'm good charity."

"Charity?" Jack raised his mug and laughed. "He gets to see your charts, I'm sure!"

"Keep it down, mate!" Greg glanced around. "No talking about charts in here. That's a bad word in my tavern."

"Aye, right. Sorry, I just thought you knew something about Scyhathen or Kalis that I don't."

Greg collected a bottle of tea from a basket near the corner. "Maybe I do, maybe I don't. Nothing to brag about, mind. Why bring up that name, anyway?"

"Lewis told me that you're the resident expert on Scyhathen in these parts."

Greg uncorked the bottled tea and drank, then caught his breath. "No captain on the sea was more legendary, except maybe you."

Jack guffawed. "I'm nothing but a lousy merchant trader. The glory's always gone to the explorer, everyone knows this."

"And they're the ones who get lost to Gaia." Gregory took another swig of tea.

"Rightly said, barkeep."

A patron with a braided beard got between them. "Explorers? Fools, not famous."

"Says you, Murdock," Jack scoffed.

"You talk of the great Terrance Scyhathen? Gone 1583, lost to the demonic Nemaris Islands. His majesty King Roland of Cimmordia's dog, Martin Kalis? Gone 1571 in the rainy forest!" Murdock leaned against the bar as Greg delivered another mug of ale. "Explorers be a bunch of fools who're afraid of real work."

"Then tell me why we're talking about Scyhathen all these years later," Jack paused to finish his ale. "And why we're not talking the shipping trade, hm?"

"You're the only man to talk shop in a tavern, Tate." Murdock slapped the table. "Gimme one, DeLeuit."

Greg crossed his arms. "Last I checked, Murdock, you skipped out on your last tab. Shall I call on the constable again?"

"I work for a living, DeLeuit! Got a shipment of ore from up north coming due next week, and your Dieterian Dictares be on it."

"Let's hope you're right," Greg gave a nod.

"As it happens, Scyhathen hasn't been forgotten in Grand Point, if you must know," Jack began. "I have it on good authority that a group from Crossview Bay aims to find Rhydar's treasure."

"You're serious?" Gregory hesitated. "Impossible."

"They's a bunch of fools, going to Nemaris Island. Nothing there but sirens and demons," Murdock said before finishing the ale. "Twenty five years lost at sea and ol' Scyhathen still makes news in the smallest of bergs!"

"Who's good authority, Jack?" Gregory asked.

He patted his chest. "Mine. Heard a Ranthathian cult man myself, bragging all about it 'fore I left Jyrel."

"Like you can trust any man who'll sign his name in blood for the Ranthath Cult," Murdock muttered. "They's fools too, but at least they eat well."

Marianne came into the room just in time to hear Murdock's statement. "What's all this talk of pirates in my tavern? Miles Murdock, you know better than that."

"Sorry, madam." Murdock tugged on his stocking cap.

Marianne spun her ladle in her hand. "Have you checked the books, Greg? I think he still owes us from last month."

Murdock grinned brightly, glancing quickly at the door. "That me cap'n calling? Best be off. Top of the evening!"

"No more booze for him till he pays, eh Greg!" Jack laughed. "It's always the same."

"We're out of stew, Greg." Marianne patted her husband on his shoulder before raising her ladle to the room. "Last call, ya'll!"

A groan roared across the crowd. The patrons quickly finished their drinks and began to filter out a few at a time.

"Another good night," Marianne said.

Gregory smiled passively. He kept his focus on Captain Tate as his wife went back to the kitchen. He then poured another ale and slid it next to Jack's empty mug. "Tell me more about that group from Crossview Bay."

"Surely you've heard of the master cartographer, Westlyn?" Jack asked.

Gregory nodded. "Collector of maps, under protection by King Harmon of Dieteria. How is Lou?"

Jack sipped from the ale. "Grieving for his wife and recovering from poison. His house was raided by men from the Cult."

Gregory leaned onto the bar and lowered his head. "Oh no."

"He'll live, but he'll be laid up awhile." Jack shook his head. "He was lucky."

"What of his collection?"

"The guard got there quickly, but not before a few charts were taken. The man had a thousand charts, Greg. Easily every island from Janep to Sysia that's known."

Gregory poured himself a cup of ale. "Yes, but for him to be robbed..."

Jack chuckled. "Look at you, drinking! Anyway, the man could be called careless I suppose, but for someone wanting to go to the Nemaris Islands after news like that? Any man who won't call that a coincidence must have a siren for a mother, I tell you what."

Gregory sipped from the ale, gasping from the alcohol. "Interesting choice of words, Jack."

"Take it easy, man." Jack looked him in the eye. "Listen. I know what they're up to, DeLeuit. No doubt they found something of Scyhathen's if they're planning a raid."

By now most of the patrons had departed. Jack and Gregory were alone in the tavern.

Gregory poured the rest of his ale into a basin. "Glad we're the only people who know about this, Jack." He grabbed a towel and began to wipe down the bar. "We don't need every sailor in the Centra Sea talking it up."

"Agreed." He stood up and gave the bar a slap. "You thinking what I am?"

"No," Gregory replied quickly. "I'm no sailor, you know that."

"If they have a map of Siren Island, certainly they're after Rhydar's treasure." Tate

chuckled to himself. "Think about it! Wouldn't ye love to be the first to lay a finger on a treasure like that?"

"Don't need no treasure... got me a wife and a child on the way."

"That so? Well! I owe you a cigar, son." Jack stopped himself. "Hell, this is bigger than cigars anyways! Gold, Gregory, gold! All kinds of magic paraphernalia - a king's ransom in a cave the size of this tavern."

"For some men, you're right, that would be a treasure." Gregory turned away and sipped more of the ale. "But not me."

Jack jumped after him. "All we have to do is beat them there, Greg. Think of it! They lead us right to the treasure, and when the demon's took 'em all, we'll have the place to ourselves!"

"Or we'll be taken by demons."

"Be able to buy our own island, a castle guarding the treasure at our feet..."

Greg shuddered. "Charmed by sirens and eaten by monsters in every cavern..."

"Have our meals prepared by servants and go fishing every day..."

"Haunted by doomed souls of the sea who lurk in every dark corner..."

Tate gazed upward longingly. "And live out our days in luxury and warmth in security and comfort!"

"Or be stalked by Epoth the Scourge forever," Gregory spoke softly into his chest.

Jack slapped the counter. "Who in the Centra is that?"

Gregory came out from behind the bar and threw up his arms. "What is wealth but something to lure lesser men to your doorstep?" Gregory gazed upon the wall, a painting of a young woman from the neck up with long flowing hair. Though it was not a portrait of Marianne, he still worried for Cynthia, the woman who had raised him.

"No?" Jack leaned close. "What of your family's future, Greg? Gold would secure their future, wouldn't it?"

His future was a cloudy haze. Even when Marianne had told him she was pregnant, Gregory hadn't forgotten Cynthia's omen. He was destined one day to return to the Nemars Islands. Everything his childhood had stood for could be lost. Perhaps this would be the only way. "If it means that much to you, Jack, you would leave me no choice than to see that this dream of yours comes true."

Jack spun in a circle and threw a fist into the air. "Now you're talking like a gentleman!"

"But under one condition," Greg turned.

"Anything, man. Name it."

"Nobody, save the two of us, know the true intentions of this mission. No discussing equal shares, no maps, no mention of our destination. Our cover would be to deliver charts to Mr. Kessler of Derricksberg, who runs the mines west of town, in exchange for supplies to raid Sundrop."

"Sundrop Isles? You'd think we could recruit men to raid the Cult's headquarters? Never!"

"It's simple. We put out word that there are treasure maps floating around the sea, and even put a few out there ourselves. This distracts the pirates, who then leave their base to chase the treasure. Then, we leave for the Nemaris Islands, rush into the cavern, claim the treasure, and leave before they can catch us..."

"That be too complicated, man. Nobody will be fool enough to take on the *Caskliner*. Nobody."

Gregory sighed and went back to his cleaning. "It's no worse than your idea."

"Actually, mine is even simpler," Jack smiled. "We claim the treasure first, and don't mess with the Cult."

Gregory chuckled. "So it is."

"You in or not, friend? You're too nice a guy for me to just steal from. Especially if your wife is with child."

Gregory gazed towards the door to the kitchen. "Jack, you're a man of honor... aren't you?"

"I am, and so are you." Jack put his hand on Gregory's shoulder. "But there are men in the Centra Sea who are anything but; you and I both know this. We'd be protecting the treasure by claiming it first, demons and monsters be damned."

"All right."

"You're in?"

"Yes. But it will take time to prepare. For now, nobody in Harper's Bay or anywhere else can know of this."

Jack nodded. "Agreed."

"When do we sail?"

"Give me time to assemble some trustworthy sailors and supplies. The *Inspid* can be manned by as few as twelve men, ourselves included. Didn't you say you sailed once?"

Gregory nodded. "With Scyhathen himself, when I was but a lad."

"Really? And yet you hate the sailing life?"

"No, Jack. Not the sailing life, just the troubles that come with it." He gazed back towards the kitchen. "Though I know what Marianne will say."

"I'll see you in a few days." Jack gave him a confident brush on the shoulder and headed for the exit. "You'll know how to swing her favor."

"Perhaps." Gregory tossed the damp rag over his shoulder. "Perhaps not."

"You're a damn fool, Gregory!"

He had waited until the tavern was secured and clean before even venturing the subject. Now, in their upstairs bedroom, Gregory had anticipated this as soon as he made the deal with Captain Tate.

"You're right, Marianne." With a depressed sigh, Gregory knelt before a bookshelf, where he held in his hands a leather bound journal with a medallion sewn into the cover. Defeated, he sighed and slowly returned it to the shelf.

"I am?" Anticipating a skirmish amongst the patrons was one of Marianne's best skills. Here, however, was a fight already won. She calmed down, though her ire had been exchanged for curiosity. "What do you mean?"

He gazed out onto the moonlight sea from their bedroom window. "To return to those islands now, with so much happening around here. It's not fair of me to jeopardize our future."

She patted her belly. "Your future is here. Not out there, not in the Centra Sea, and certainly not on any island filled with danger."

"Scyhathen was a man who believed in locations that held great stories, Marianne. Not just treasure. He was sailing for the icy continent of Phrynn, but a great storm waylaid the crew. While Scyhathen never intended to land on the Nemaris Islands, he stayed because of the history there."

"You told me the ship ran aground in a nearby shoal."

Gregory nodded. "Yes, but the tide eventually shifted and we could have left at any time. He refused to leave before he learned all their secrets."

"And did he?" Marianne sat down on the bed.

Gregory sat on the bench alongside the bay window that overlooked the sea and shook his head. Though the crew would survive to explore the islands, all of his crewmates, save for the captain, later died upon those same shoals. If not for the timely arrival of Cynthia and her sisters, nothing from the *Nemaris* would have been salvaged.

"And you, dear... remind me how you survived?" Marianne asked.

"Because of the captain," Gregory replied softly. "We saved each other, managing to swim to shore, each of us taking turns. He swam in agony as the saltwater penetrated his wounds, and became too much of a burden. I doubt I could have saved him if I had a genie in my service."

Marianne nodded. "You never found Rhydar's treasure."

"There is no treasure, Marianne. Scyhathen and the crew found it, but the treasure went down with the wreck of the *Nemaris*. But I did leave behind a few things that should never have been."

"Oh?" Marianne leaned in closer. "Such as?"

"The Spirit of the Sea. Scyhathen's longsword."

"The famous sword which gave him the edge in any conflict."

Gregory nodded. "I also salvaged Cynthia's portrait, several of his handwritten charts, and his original exploration journals. Items that can never fall into the wrong hands." He brushed his hair back, wiping away a bead of sweat. "I never should've left them with him... I mean, I trusted that they would be safe..."

"But what can a corpse do to protect such treasures?"

Gregory turned and nodded as he continued to look towards the calm waters of the sea beyond the window. "That is why I have to go back. To ensure that they remain safe from anyone. I promised the captain."

She rose and put her hand on his shoulder. "The *Nemaris* Islands, how far away are they? Would you be back in time for our child to be born?"

Gregory nodded. "Captain Tate said he would have a crew ready in several days. Our voyage should not last any longer than three weeks, allowing for favorable weather conditions, of course."

"Three weeks...." She patted him on the shoulder warmly. "I often forget what you went through in your youth, Gregory. You are the only man to return from the *Nemaris* Islands."

"And I will return again, Marianne. I give you my word."

She did not respond immediately.

"This is the only way."

A moment later, Marianne finally nodded. "I could wait three weeks for you to return, if I had to."

"Some wives of the sailors wait far longer, Mary."

Marianne turned away from the window. "Do they? How exactly does one run a household, or a tavern, when so much time passes between paydays? I worry if I should have to hire someone in your place."

Gregory rose and massaged his wife's shoulders. "If it will help, I will meet with Harrion. He will ensure that you and the child are taken care of."

"Would he be willing to do that? We already owe him so much."

“I will talk to him tomorrow.” Gregory kissed his wife on the top of her head. “Do not worry. I would not leave you if there were any less pressing a reason.”

Marianne turned and kissed him back. “Then I can let you go with Captain Tate.”

“I am sorry to leave, and I hope you know that this means a lot to me.”

“And you mean to me even more,” Marianne replied.

Moments later, the couple turned out the lights and retired for the evening.

That night, Gregory was unable to sleep. Visions of grey clouds plagued his thoughts. A one-eyed man walked through the jungle fog, his sword sharp and dripping with blood.

Early the next morning, sometime well after the moon had gone beneath the sea and before the morning doves woke, Gregory was pacing the floor downstairs. Hoping to keep Marianne from waking, he went outside and locked the door behind him and walked north towards Diamond Creek and the waterfall.

Quietly, he reached into his pocket and removed the green rod from his pocket. If not for the small blue sphere at the end, one might mistake it for a discarded stand from a blacksmith's forge. The sphere's strong cobalt blue color appeared otherworldly that contained a swirling white essence, as if it had fallen from the clouds.

Gregory approached the quiet murmuring of the water, which descended from the top of the ridge some fifty yards above, before descending across several shifted slabs of hard rock that made up the side of the cliff before collecting in a small basin. From there, the water meandered its way another hundred feet or so until it descended one more rocky slope into the Centra Sea. Convinced that only the waterfall and himself were awake at this early hour, he raised the rod and stood in the shallow basin.

He slowly directed the tip of the rod towards the cascading waters. "Show me what I wish to see."

The metal rod began to glow, emitting a soft blue eminence that spread to the face of the waterfall and began to project an image. As the glow of the rod became more intense, the waterfall became less apparent and was obscured by a dimly lit cavern, kept illuminated by the reflection of gold coins, silver goblets polished to a mirror-like luster, and a row of swords, shields and staves of varying magical qualities.

Gregory allowed the scene to play out before his eyes for a few moments, when he gave the rod a wave. The image in the waterfall was quickly dashed away, but was replaced moments later with another image, this one of a serene beachfront. Turquoise waters lapped onto smooth tan sands as a lush green jungle could be seen further ashore.

His mouth shifted slowly into a smile. He then gave the rod another wave, and the image changed to a narrow bay within a rocky cove. Many of the rocks were flat or pointed, and would make navigation by boat difficult in the narrow confines. Two mermaids were resting comfortably upon two separate rocks. One had long golden hair and cerulean blue scales that sparkled like the surrounding water, while the other had equally long amber hair with scales of fuchsia below her waist. The blue mermaid was wearing a tunic that had been crafted from the canvas of a sail, while the pink one wore a skimpier outfit made from a yellow bed sheet across her midriff.

He waved the rod one last time, to another location, this one completely submerged. Two other merpeople were here. The female had scales of teal and was deeply concerned about something, while the male had pale green scales and was without other clothing, holding a spear

made of coral and describing something to the mermaid.

Gregory gasped. "Cynthia... what could you be saying? If only the magic was stronger, so I could hear you..."

As the magic faded the waterfall returned to its normal flow and the image vanished. Gregory put the rod into his pocket and sat along the river, using a dry rock as a stool. He looked up as three morning doves took off into the distance.

Several hours later, the town was active and the sun was high in the sky. An old tower that was once a lighthouse near the center of the waterfront, a short distance from a rocky outcropping known as Bard's Point, had been converted into the home of Harrion Lewis, a lonely historian who acted as Harper's Bay unofficial librarian. His primary business was decoding forgotten charts and texts, but it had been his hobby of craft brewing that kept the Dancing Dragon Tavern operational.

"My dear Mr. DeLeuit." The tall, stern faced man adjusted his glasses and glared down from the stoop. "In need of another barrel of ale already?"

"I should be good for tonight, Harrion..." Gregory folded his hands nervously. "Any chance I can come in for tea?"

Harrion stepped aside. "Your tea is usually better received than mine."

"There's something we need to discuss."

The men bypassed the entryway and a row of bookshelves and passed into Harrion's sitting room that overlooked Bard's Point, taking a seat on either side of a round table.

"I just started a pot, it'll be a few moments." Harrion took a seat. "What's on your mind?"

"You've done so much for Marianne and I, and I feel like I'm imposing to even bring it up..."

Harrion raised a finger. "Gregory, Gregory. Let's recap what I've done for you. You have a place to live in the millhouse tavern that I acquired through a game of caro many years ago, yes?"

Gregory nodded.

"By living there and taking care of the place, you have done me a fine service by creating one less distraction from my studies." Harrion raised two fingers. "Two. I share a recipe for a brewer's lager I acquired after a game of caro, along with a bag of yeast from Eastrell."

"Aye, two," Gregory said. "And you are compensated for a third of the profits."

"Which you are most kind to offer, though the extra money is inconsequential to my savings." Harrion raised three fingers. "Third, I also have offered a corner of my study upstairs for items that were salvaged from the *Nemaris* and Captain Scyhathen's private cabin."

Gregory's face clouded. "Surely you heard about the attack in Davenport on Mr. Westlyn."

Harrion nodded in response. "Though I consider you a friend first and hardly a charity case, I wonder what else I have to offer besides this sitting room, my chambers, the kitchen and perhaps my father's bedroom, which still needs sorting out."

"Your father was a good man," Gregory said.

Harrion turned to look towards the kitchen, which was on the south end of the house. "Tea."

"It was about the attack on Mr. Westlyn's that I wanted to discuss. There's a few more things I would like to share with you, but I also need to know that Marianne will be taken care of

if I am to leave.”

“Leave?” Harrion rose to check on the tea. When he returned, he placed a wooden tray with two earthenware cups and a matching tea pot onto the table. “Are you and Marianne planning a move, even when she is with child?”

“No, no... not exactly. I have to go to the Nemaris Islands for a short expedition. There are items of Scythathen’s that are too valuable to remain there unguarded any longer.”

Harrion nodded but did not yet respond to the question. “Do you still take sugar and lemon?”

“Please.”

Harrion retrieved a small cup of sugar and two lemon wedges. “You would go on an expedition, right before the summer, and then add more items to my study, perhaps?”

“No, those items would later be moved to either Cimmordia Castle or Davenport, after I confer with the royal archives of each.”

“I would suggest Davenport. There is much unrest in South Cimmordia these days. And Rebecca Dolitrave is the new advisor to the royal navy.”

"Rumors suggest the post was primed for Captain Marshall, yes." Gregory nodded. "I want to be certain that Marianne and the child will be cared for, if something should happen. You know the stories of Nemaris Island, Harrion. To this day I can still hear his words in my memories... and my nightmares." Gregory gazed towards the window. "The stories are very real."

Harrion nodded. "Perhaps I could find a few days a week to assist Marianne with the tavern. I seem to be a night owl when it comes to my studies."

"That would mean so much to her." Gregory bowed politely. "I can't bear the thought of her being alone to raise the child... but at least knowing that there's someone else here for her would ease my nightmares for a little while."

"Our arraignment would continue even in your absence, Gregory, as I consider my properties yours, so long as they continue to be used in an outstanding manner."

Gregory nodded. "I appreciate everything you've done for us."

"Indeed." He sipped from the tea and nodded at the brew. "A fine blend after all."

"Is this new?" Gregory sipped from it and smiled. "Wonderful."

"At least I can continue one hobby in my spare time," Harrion mused. "Consider your family well taken care of in your absence."

"Thank you."

Later that evening, the Dancing Dragon Tavern enjoyed another successful service. Marianne slept soundly in her husband's arms, while Gregory was again tormented by his dreams. He was a small boy, walking through a seemingly endless tunnel. The walls were rocky, damp, and gradually growing more narrow and closer as he walked. In the distance of the darkness, Gregory was occasionally blinded by what appeared to be a lightning storm in the cavern beyond, far away.

He did not wish to continue walking towards it, yet he could not seem to stop his feet.

Young Gregory turned quickly to face away from the storm and into the endless darkness behind. A grand torrent of water was approaching, and he could not brace fast enough as it overtook him.

A moment later, as he found himself standing in the long cavern, he found himself able to breathe and otherwise undamaged. The lightning storm at the end of the cavern was still raging

on, however unaffected, and he was also no longer walking alone.

"Child... why do you return here?"

Floating in the space next to him, the lovely mermaid with bluish green scales floated in the still water just above the ground. She had a sullen, saddened expression.

"Cynthia...?" Gregory smiled.

"Why do you continue to come here? Why continue to hurt yourself so?"

Gregory couldn't answer, instead continuing to turn towards the lightning storm at the end of the cavern, which continued to pulse with intensity. It was growing larger. Gregory sat down on the ground where he stood. The lightning storm continued to grow in intensity, appearing to spread into the cavern towards them.

Cynthia swam behind him and held his shoulders. "It was your choice to leave, but you did not act randomly. I knew that you must leave at some point. But now, the time has come to return. Only you can decide in which manner that will occur."

"Yes... I do not wish to leave Marianne and the child, but by doing so I won't be leaving him with them." He paused and took a deep breath before turning to the lightning storm. "But I will be bringing Epth with me."

"Gregory," Cynthia smiled briefly before turning sullen again. "He has never left. He could not follow you. He waits for as long as it takes. By leaving, you protect your loved ones. You also come here to protect your legacy. It is the only way, as Rhydar foresaw."

"What if I make him wait?" Gregory burst to his feet, quickly turning around. "What if I wait forever?"

"Then he will find you in forever! He will chase you across the nine realms. He will claim your soul, and those of whom you love most. He will never be defeated, and when he gains enough power..." Cynthia closed her eyes and sighed. "He will claim Gaia and all shall be shrouded in darkness for the dark days that shall come to pass. None shall survive."

By now the lightning storm was close. Gregory felt a soft tingling sensation that slowly developed into terrible, pulsing pain. The very air was stinging in agony, burning with a fury that grew exponentially by the moment.

"Is that the future you want? I did not raise you to throw away the world so quickly."

"No! No, Cynthia, you didn't." Gregory turned and faced the lightning storm, which was hovering a few feet away. "Epth..."

"Has never left, and waits for as long as it takes," Cynthia said softly. Her voice began to waver. "It has been foretold that your offspring would defeat him. Would you deny Rhydar's foretelling?"

"Would I believe an old man... whom I never knew?" Gregory stepped backward.

Cynthia was no longer there, though the water in the cavern had remained. Gregory was alone. He was facing the lightning storm directly head on. He had no shield, no sword. He patted the vest of his jacket for the green magic rod. The pocket was empty. He was completely defenseless.

The cloud of the lightning storm continued to approach. He backed away again.

There was no cavern behind him any longer. Solid rock. He could not run.

Gregory stepped forward. The glowing entity was about to overtake him.

Marianne shook him awake. "Gregory? You're sweating. Calm down! I'm here for you. Wake up!"

Gregory gazed about the room. His bedroom. The familiar trunk in the corner. The

mannequin that held Marianne's turquoise and ivory wedding dress with lace and petticoats. The bookshelf near the window that held the last journal of Captain Scyhathen, incomplete. The wardrobe that held his shirts and his coat were intact. His sailing cap was atop the wardrobe. A soft breeze came in through the window from the sea.

"Gregory? Are you okay, dear?"

"Yes, dear. You're here."

"And I'm okay as long as you're here too," Marianne laid back down.

Gregory sighed, staring towards the open rafters of the ceiling.

* * *

Gregory walked past the marketplace and paused to admire the blossoms growing outside the florist's shop. Following a picket fenced trail towards the waterfront, he passed by a fish monger and strolled onto the dock. He was wearing his coat and his captain's cap, a gift given to him by Scyhathen himself when the crew left Grand Point those many years ago. The cap was big for him then, but now it was a perfect fit.

Walking onto the third sloop, Gregory took a close look at the *Insipid*, the boat that Captain Tate had secured for their voyage. Though Tate had made his reputation on a larger ship, he had recently acquired the *Insipid* from a friend up north. The ship was equipped with two mainsails, two jibs and all the riggings necessary for a fast crossing despite its size.

"Well, what do you think, eh?" Tate waved his hands as he descended the gangplank to the dock. "Good to see you this morning."

"Yes, she looks like a fine vessel, Jack." Gregory shook the captain's hand.

"You want to get to business, aye? The men should be along soon."

"I think it would be best if we left as soon as we are able. The winds have been favorable the past few days." Gregory walked the stairs to the quarter deck and over to the helm, where the ship's steering wheel was located. He ran his hand across the polished pine of the wheel. "Do you have faith in the crewmen?"

"Aye, I've scoured the taverns from Cimmordia and back in the past few days, and those I've found have proved their worth. I took the liberty of testing them against the currents, and they're quite capable."

"Twelve men against the demons of the Nemaris Islands..." Gregory mused quietly to himself before leaning in close to Captain Tate. "Did you tell them where we might be heading?"

"I can hardly keep a man on board as it is, seeing as how the average sailor prefers payment to parrots these days," Tate replied.

Gregory gave a shrug. "Can't say I blame them."

"Since we're not offering top dollar, I told the men that they'd be sailing to Teraske to pick up supplies. Maybe they'll forgive a slight detour."

"Jack, there's no telling what we'll find there. There may be no treasure. We have no charts of the islands, the men won't want to stay..."

"You just said that you know your way around, aye?" Jack gave a confident smile. "As long as you're aboard, we'll be safe there, right?"

Gregory gave another non-committed shrug. "You sure know how to cheer up a man."

Jack patted Gregory's back once more. "I don't want to hear 'bout any worries, aye? Only the upbeat sailor has any chance where we're going."

A group of well built seamen, some surly, some burley, some tall, some with sleeves and some without, all were carrying a basket or a bag of supplies for their journey as they walked onto the dock. The leader of the group, a sailor with grey hair and a red bandana for a cap, stood at the bottom of the gangplank and saluted Captain Tate.

"Captain Tate, sir! Your crew requests permission to come aboard."

The captain gave a nod and folded his hands behind his back. "Granted. It's time for the morning meeting."

The men filed onto the deck and gathered in a large semicircle, the taller men standing in the back and the shorter in the front.

Gregory turned towards Tate and whispered. "They in the navy or something?"

"I told you I'd find good men." He stepped forward. "Men, this here is Gregory DeLeuit, the mate for our sail. He may not look like much, but he's from good sailing stock. Learned from Captain Scyhathen 'imself."

The men murmured amongst themselves.

Captain Tate turned towards the lead man who had called out at first, the older man with the bandana. "Mr. Whitmore."

The older man stepped forward. "Master chief Harv Whitmore, mister mate, sir."

Gregory gave a modest bow.

"Upon inspection of the *CS Insidid* this dawn, oh five hundred hours, the second chief officer J.T. Giggins checked the riggings and sails to be in satisfactory condition, cap'n. In our opinion, sir, we find this ship acceptable for all conditions found within the Centra Sea and the outlying waters."

"Excellent. Mr. Tetson?"

The man named Tetson stepped forward, being a taller fellow near the rear of the group. He had arms which resembled tree trunks, was bald, and wore no sleeves but only a vest and dark blue leggings. "Cap'n Tate, sir, and the mate Mr. DeLeuit, sirs."

Jack and Gregory nodded.

"Upon my inspection of the bilge and the hull the ship was deemed to be free of defects and well suited for the rigors of sailing."

Jack nodded towards a shorter, younger fellow that came aboard last. The boy could've been a teenager, perhaps. "Mr. Roenick, your report?"

The young man with the light brown, almost blond hair, nervously stepped forward. "As requested by the captain, sir, I have secured twelve rain suits for the crew in the event of inclement weather. I have also secured a barrel of oranges for the cook, Mr. Stafford, and a supply of salted pork belly for the length of our sail across the Centra Sea."

"Pork belly, Jack?" Gregory asked. "That won't be all we're having on ship, is it?"

"Plenty of protein, plus we've already got lots of potatoes, Gregory. You'll eat well. Mr. Stafford is a wizard with potatoes. Aren't you, Mickey?"

The most rotund man of the crew, Mr. Stafford, gave a hearty laugh. "Aye cap'n."

"Aye, then." Gregory wondered if he shouldn't bring along a bottle of Marianne's stew just as a precaution. "Then I guess we have everything we need."

"Aye, lads, you done good." Jack paced the quarterdeck. "Good work indeed. Derrisberg awaits our arrival in several days. We sail with the evening tide. Dismissed."

The men gave a salute and dispersed. Most went below deck, though a few of them began to climb the riggings while two men went to work with the mop and bucket.

"Tonight, Jack? I thought ships left at dawn?" Gregory asked.

"Eastern winds come on the night tide with the spring, Mr. DeLeuit." He waved to follow as they entered his cabin. "When you sailed with Scyhathen, when did you leave?"

"I was five. We left in July."

"In winter?" Jack chuckled. "And you were only five years? I've never heard anyone taking on a cabin boy of five years."

They both found a seat at a round table in the center of the room, which was also equipped with a writing desk, a small shelf designed to carry scrolls for maps and charts, a wardrobe and an ordinary bed, surrounded by windows that overlooked the stern.

"The south winds were at their strongest, and that was the time that Scyhathen wished to leave. My mother had recently passed, and my father would pass from exhaustion not a year after Scyhathen took me in. I was very smart for my age, and the ship's navigator Mr. Mandalay taught me basic reading and writing in between duties."

"I recall your folks died when you were young,," Jack trailed off.

Gregory sat in a chair along the port wall. "I never saw my father again, for he died before I could get back to Elna City. I sailed with the *Nemaris* across the Dieterian Passage, the coast of Crellan, and north to Aldera before we went on to sail south from the city of Grand Point."

"How long would you say you served with Scyhathen, then?" Jack asked.

"About two years. Scyhathen himself would teach me much about charts and even a little about diplomacy."

Jack chuckled. "Did he carry that sword around with him all the time, then?"

Gregory nodded. "It never left his side. I can't say he slept with it, but it wouldn't surprise me."

"Just think... you were there, with him on ship. You are the lucky one."

"Lucky is not the word I would use. Privileged, perhaps, but..." Gregory trailed off.

"Those ten men who you met just now? Any one of 'em would give their left eye to have done what you did. Some of 'em would even give their right. To have sailed with Scyhathen..."

"Dreams have a way of turning into nightmares, Jack."

Jack gave a nod. "Aye, sometimes."

The afternoon went by very quickly for Gregory. He stopped to buy a bouquet of roses at the florist shop on his return trip, packed his few necessities into a rucksack, packing mostly books.

"Basic Guide to Glassmaking by Neff Rowan... A Herbalist's Guide to Living In the Forest by Kabal Bernson... Greg? What are all these books?"

"Stuff to read on those lonely nights, dear." He held up one last book. The Field Guide of Island Ecology, by Thomas Moore. "Yes, this is the one. Mr. Moore lived on the Pye Lei Islands, east of Dunn, for six months before being rescued, though he might've used the word removed."

"But dear, you're not planning on being marooned, are you? It's only a three week sail."

"I find the book interesting, dear." He added it to the bottom of his rucksack. "I always liked the name Thomas."

"I do too, Gregory." Marianne wiped a tear from her eye.

"What is it, dear?" Gregory looked up from his packing. "Are you all right?"

She caught herself. "Something is telling me to make you stay. I know you will be safe,

I do, but my mother would scold me for letting you go.”

“Jack Tate is the best captain on the Centra Sea, Marianne. His crew was hand picked; he knows these waters better than anyone.” Gregory went over and held her tightly. “I have the utmost faith in his crew and his abilities. There’s nothing to fear.”

She nodded, sobbing into his shoulder. “Three weeks may become an eternity, Gregory.”

“Mary, your father was a messenger for the King of Xavier, yes? How many trips did he take?”

“Countless,” Marianne confessed. “But that’s hardly a comparison.”

Gregory held her tightly. “There is no span of time in this universe that will ever decay that bond between us.”

She held him even tighter.

“Marianne, you are familiar with the story of the doves at Xavier Castle?”

She nodded. “They say that when the castle has doves living nearby, the castle will be forever in peace. My father told it to me many times, and it helped me not to worry. There were often many doves near our home also.”

Gregory smiled. “Three doves. Okay? That is how you will know that I am safe. Three doves. Remember that, won’t you?”

“Three... three doves?” Marianne asked. “What does the legend of the doves from the castle have to do with us?”

“There will be three of us in less than seven months. Three doves. Remember that,”

Gregory stressed. “Promise?”

Marianne nodded. “Three doves. Okay, Gregory.”

He gave her a nod back and held her tightly once more. “Jack is expecting me. I had best keep packing.”

Marianne gazed out the window. “Gregory?”

“Yes dear?”

“I don’t recall ever seeing doves in Harper’s Bay.”

“Don’t worry about it now, dear. There will be.”

Marianne sat down on an old rocking chair in the back storage room. There was a crib in here, but it was currently being used for storing a collection of nets, as well as a large stock of belaying pins and ship’s canvas for sails.

Several hours later, Gregory gave his wife a tight hug as he stood in the doorway of their tavern. He slung the rucksack over his shoulder and adjusted his cap. “Will you come to see us off, dear?”

Marianne gave a confident smile. “If you ask me to, I will... but I would rather sit in our window and watch you from there.”

“Are you sure?”

“I invited Harrion over. I hope to discuss his chart and get an idea of where you are heading.”

“If it will comfort you, then please meet with him. Watching from our bedroom upstairs will be almost as good as watching from the dock.”

He gave her one more hug and then a kiss on the lips. “Farewell, my wife. Remember, watch for the doves.”

He then put his hand against the doorjamb, and then with a confident pat walked out the door. He didn’t walk with much excitement, nor with a jaunt in his step. Marianne’s eyes

followed Gregory just as Harrion was approaching the tavern from the south with a pot of tea and a chart under his arm.

“Marianne? My dear, you must not catch cold,” Harrion said. “Did I miss him?”

She gave a silent nod.

“Come, come. Let us go inside, I brought some tea. I had hoped to catch him before he left.”

“Show me the charts, Harrion. I want to know where he’ll be going.”

The departure of the ship was free of fanfare. Ships came and went in Harper’s Bay quite frequently, and few onlookers turned out. Those who were on the waterfront might wave at the sound of the ship’s bell, but that was all.

Gregory stood atop the stern and gazed toward the north side of Bard’s Point, where he could see the Dancing Dragon Tavern just beyond the shoals. He could see the light of a lantern in his bedroom flickering.

“No more looking back, mate,” Jack said as he patted Gregory’s shoulder. “You want to rest up before the night watch?”

Gregory gave a nod. “Aye. Just wanted to see home... for one last time.”

“Home’s the ship now, lad!” Jack gave a laugh. “I’ll find you ‘round twenty hundred, aye? Don’t forget there’s a clock in the main hallway for the correct time.”

Gregory nodded. “I won’t forget.”

Jack made his way to the front of the poop deck. “Right lads, full sail! Westward ho!”

“Aye captain!” A general chorus came from the men who worked the sails.

Gregory leaned onto the rail for a brief moment, and convinced that the vision of the lantern in his wife’s bedroom would remain in his memory for some time, headed below deck.

A few hours later, Gregory found himself awake in the caverns of his unconscious. He was a child once more, still walking onward towards the room filled with the lightning storm. He was walking further towards the end cavern than he had ever done before. The more distance he seemed to cover, however, the further the lightning storm seemed to be.

He paused and glanced behind him, where he could almost make out the city of Harper’s Bay, but it was dark. Only a single lantern could be seen in a house near the northern outskirts. Marianne was in the window, with a swollen belly. She was fading into the darkness.

“Cynthia! I cannot reach the room... nor can I return...”

“You can always return, Gregory.” Cynthia’s deep, dulcet voice was wavering, but clear. “You will never reach either location unless you decide.”

Gregory began to run towards the village, but found it growing darker and further away as the cavern seemed to elongate before his very eyes. In a shot, he turned and ran towards the lightning storm. Even though he was closing his eyes, he ran as fast as he could, this time toward the flashing entity. After too long, however, he opened his eyes and tripped, discovering that he was falling, falling through the starry sky, no longer inside a cavern but falling down, quickly, towards an endless sea...

“Mate? Begging your pardon?”

“Mary?” He woke in a deep sweat, tossing the covers aside to realize just where he was. He didn’t recognize the crewman, who clearly didn’t sound like his beloved Marianne. “Wha?”

“Mr. DeLeuit, sir? Everything okay?” The young man with the almost blonde hair gave a nervous wave. “It’s Mr. Roenick, sir. I was asked to check on you before the night watch.”

“What is our current location, Mr. Roenick?”

“Straight west of Bard’s Point and three days sail from Grand Point, sir.”

Gregory nodded with a yawn. “Aye, sailor. I will be on deck momentarily.”

Mr. Roenick gave a salute.

Gregory went to his rucksack and reached near the bottom of it, remembering that he had placed inside six bottles, carefully wrapped and separated with handkerchiefs, of his rare bottled sweet tea. He popped the cork and sipped from one of them, pausing a moment to collect himself. Then, once awake and alert, he replaced the cork and adjusted his coat and hat before going out on deck.

The evening watch was a rather dull one. The winds proved to be steady and required very little tending of the riggings or the rudder. Gregory largely spent his time next to the helmsman, Mr. Whitmore, who kept the ship on an even 189 degree heading, just a few degrees south from west. He found himself leaning on the rail more and more, as the many years on land had not prepared him for the motion of the waves.

“How are the sails, Mr. Whitmore?” Gregory asked after a few moments, thinking he was obligated to do so.

“All seems normal, sir. Shall I trim the sails for optimum performance? Or would you care to inspect them yourself?”

Gregory shook his head as he hid his sea legs from the sailor. “Not at this hour. I trust your judgment.”

“This ship may be from old stock, sir, but I know it’s well built and well seasoned. If you could wring the hull boards like a sponge, sir, you’d only get salt out of ‘em,” Whitmore replied.

Gregory gave a nod and took solice in the evening breeze. The calm of the starry night kept his nightmares at bay, and for the moment, all was behind him.

As quiet as the evening watch had been, the night watch was ever more. Gregory found himself nodding off throughout the evening. Luckily, the men were so well tended to their tasks that even the ship operated at all hours with little supervision. So long as the *Inspid* continued to keep on course at its west to southwest heading, there was little to fret over.

An hour or two into the night watch, the crew began to take shifts in the riggings while going below deck for a rest. They would sleep for an hour and then return, relieving each other while making the constant adjustments needed to keep the sails at their fullest.

As the first rays of sunlight began to appear on the horizon, Jack came out onto the quarterdeck and adjusted his coat, having woke only a few moments earlier.

"Smooth sailing, gentlemen?"

Gregory gave a nod. "Captain on deck!"

Jack chuckled. “You are an old sailor, aren’t ye? No need for pomp and circumstance out here, Greg. What of the winds? We still on course?”

“Aye. You run a tight ship, Jack. All I had to do was watch the binnacle all night.”

“Told you sailing was easy,” he whispered. “Go get some grub. We’ll talk later.”

Gregory went below deck to discover that the cook, Mr. Stafford, had a pair of caged chickens on board, first from the smell and then the trail of feathers throughout the mess hall. But when he discovered the breakfast of scrambled eggs, sliced potatoes and salt pork, the smell of the birds no longer became an issue.

A few of the men in the mess hall wanted to chat, but Gregory chose to simply smile and concentrate on his breakfast. This proved more beneficial than conversation, as the shifting of the deck and the lagging nightmares were raging in his mind.

After a visit to the head, Gregory made his way back onto the deck and then followed Jack into the cabin, where a large chart of the Centra Sea was spread out on the table. A good portion of the chart was dangling off the edge of the small table. At present, the chart only showed Grand Point south to Crystal Bay, leaving a trace of the four Nemaris Islands just before falling off the table towards the floor.

Jack stood over the map before sitting. "Shortest tour I've ever taken cross the sea to Grand Point took five days." He drew a line with his finger across the map from Harper's Bay to Teraske, passing around a corner of Grand Point which extended much like a shepherd's crook out into the sea. "Past Valiavista Island we're looking at another three or four day sail, depending on conditions."

"Why not go through this passage here?" Gregory pointed to an area north of Valiavista Island, which would've met up with Grand Point. "Shenna Shallows?"

"Though the city is over here," Jack pointed to a grayed out area that filled the long spur of land and had two harbors on the north and south sides, "Grand Point itself becomes a rocky shoal known as the Shenna Shallows, which was much like your Bard's Point back home. The tidewaters have eroded what rock once connected Grand Point to Valiavista Island, and left behind a navigable, if not treacherous, stretch of seawater. Though a ship of our size could probably fit through, it's usually worth the extra day's sail around the island just to avoid beaching ourselves in the low tide."

"We have no idea if the men from the Cult have began a mission towards the Nemaris Islands, Jack." Gregory drew a line across the sea, crossing the Shenna Shallows and continuing on towards Teraske. "No pirate crew would dare go that way and risk their cargo."

"Aye," Jack nodded. "They don't want to get caught by low tide either."

"Think we could make the passage to Teraske in two days if we took the shortcut?"

"You're a bold man, Gregory DeLeuit." Jack chuckled quietly. "So long as it looks navigable when we arrive, aye. But I see any touch of beach in the shallows and we sail south. I'm not about to risk my ship before I truly get to know 'er."

"Of course, the decision to go west or south rests on you," Gregory agreed.

"Then we'll head that way for now and find out when we arrive."

"Aye sir," Gregory replied.

Jack gave a wave. "You're dismissed, Mr. DeLeuit."

Over the course of the next twenty hours, Gregory took turns watching the crew and manning the binnacle, which kept them on course. Looking upon the sea every day reminded Gregory of his youngest days, which were more interesting when learning basic arithmetic or charts. Looking out at the endless sea was tasking.

"Fine day for sailing, wouldn't you say, Mr. DeLeuit?"

Gregory was momentarily distracted from the compass by the voice of Mr. Whitmore, who was above him in the rigging.

"Aye, Mr. Whitmore?"

"Was it like this with Scyhathen?"

Gregory chuckled. "Always with The Captain... why do you suppose Scyhathen became an explorer, Mr. Whitmore?"

“Enlighten me, Mr. DeLeuit!”

“Because,” Gregory smiled, “Because the unexplored coast is always more interesting than the open sea, which is simply a road with no landmarks.”

“Aye, tis true sir! Well said.”

Two shift changes later, it was nearly twilight when the captain and Gregory met on the foredeck to survey the approaching Shenna Shallows.

Jack turned to Gregory. “You’re the navigator, friend. Do you still believe the time is not on our side?”

“I might not have bargained on us going through this passage in the dark, Jack.” Gregory motioned to the crew behind them. “Think these men are ready?”

“Aye, if you’re crazy enough to lead them. I think we might want all hands on standby, though. The shallows can go from smooth sailing to sand rather quickly.”

“There may be men from the Ranthath Cult heading to the Nemaris Islands this very moment. But, again, it’s your ship.”

Captain Tate nodded. “For this cause, Gregory, we will risk it.” He struck the bell. “All hands on deck! Get yourselves topside!”

“I’d like to go over the chart once more...” Gregory motioned towards his cabin. “Mind if I check something in my cabin quick?”

“What?” Jack drew aback. “All hands means all hands, Greg. Let’s get a consensus from the crew first, aye?”

The crewmen gathered in their circular arrangement on the main deck, short of the forecandle. Captain Tate motioned for Gregory to follow as they stood atop the rail looking down to the men.

“We’re proposing a course through the Shenna Shallows.” Jack turned to Gregory. “Mr. DeLeuit and I both believe speed is ideal, and we both believe that you men are more than capable.” He gave the men the nod. “Speak up if you have something to say!”

Mr. Whitmore stepped forward without hesitation. “I say we take the chance, captain! Waters and rocks won’t leap out in front of this ship.”

Mr. Tetson stepped out next. “I disagree, captain. No treasure nor tempest be worth risking my life.”

Captain Tate gave a nod. “Aye, anyone else?”

Mr. Roenick, the youngest man, stood forward and raised his hand. “Respecting Mr. Tetson’s stand, sir, I wouldn’t mind risking my life for some coin. But only if we are there first!”

Some of the men agreed, while Mr. Tetson was heard to mutter. “Greenhorn!”

“Fine, fine, let’s keep this civil, aye?” Jack put his hand into the air. “What say you?”

Seven of the men put up their hands.

“Aye, and against?”

Three men, including Mr. Tetson, raised their hand. “Sure seems pointless to ask, aye.”

“Mr. DeLeuit, what say you?” Jack asked.

“You are all skilled and brave, and Scyhathen would be pleased to have any of you aboard the *Nemaris* in his service.”

“Aye!” Most of the men cheered and yelled. Mr. Tetson crossed his arms and scoffed.

“Right then. To your stations.” Jack turned and gave Gregory a nod. “I hope you know what you’re doing, sir.”

Gregory nodded. "Aye. I must consult my chart, and will be right back."
"See that you do. You're commanding this run."

Sliding the lock on the door, Gregory entered his cabin and collected his rucksack from a hook along the wall and laid out the contents on the round table. From his rucksack, Gregory reached inside and removed a small painting that he had made for Marianne several years ago. He had painted it for Marianne the day that they professed their love for each other, and it showed Marianne's smile. Carefully, he replaced the image into the sack. Setting aside the books and the majority of the contents back inside, he left out one book, along with a sample of ordinary soda ash. From a small box he removed several crystals of quartz that were natural and uncut. In total he had about ten carats of quartz.

"A demon inhabits my shadow... and it is time we faced another again." Gregory reached into his vest pocket and removed his green rod. "Forgive me, Jack... Mary... forgive my actions. Though they are necessary, it pains me to abandon you."

* * *

In Harper's Bay, it was late evening. Marianne was been looking over the chart of the Centra Sea that Harrion had left with her.

Outside, there was a gentle rain falling. A cool breeze blew into the window.

Marianne drew her finger across the chart, from Harper's Bay through the Shenna Shallows and southwest to Teraske, a port on Tabia southwest of Grand Point.

"Harrion mentioned that only a few sailors are brave enough to take on the shallows, despite the width that the chart might suggest. Only one path is deep enough to navigate in low tide, and if they miss it, they will surely run aground."

She sipped from her tea and sighed.

* * *

On deck of the *Inspid*, the men took stock of the shallows and the narrow rocks which lined the shore.

"Captain Tate, sir? This be our true course?" Mr. Roenick asked.

Jack nodded as he stood on the forecandle and gazed towards the scattered rocks and sandy shoals that dotted the channel between the island and the mainland on their right. He gazed towards the waterline, seeing that the lighter shades of the water suggested very shallow water.

"Turn us left, Mr. Brimann," Jack said to the helmsman. "If we're going in here, we're going in with all men present, Mr. DeLeuit."

Gregory arrived a moment later. "Forgive my absence."

Jack nodded. "Take the helm, Mr. DeLeuit. This is your voyage."

"Aye." Gregory did so. "Trim us to three quarter sail."

"Three quarter sail!" Captain Tate cried to his men. "Brimann, the jib?"

"Aye sir!" The thin, elder man jumped onto the mainmast and began to climb into the rigging.

"Trimming the sails!" Mr. Whitmore called back from the rigging.

As the ship continued to sail, the dark sky began to glow as lightning struck in the far

distance. The winds began to rise as the sails fluttered.

“Trim them sails!” Jack called. “We might be best at half sail, Greg!”

“Storm rolling in!” Mr. Tetson called from the crow’s nest. “I swear it wasn’t there a moment earlier, cap’n!”

“Can we anchor and back it up?” Mr. Roenick asked.

“Not in these winds, they’re at our backs,” Gregory replied. “I studied the chart... I can find the path through the shallows.”

“You best be right, man,” Jack replied. “Stand fast, men!”

The winds increased three fold. Rain began to fall.

“Roenick, give me a hand with the rain gear,” Jack said.

“Aye sir.”

“Hold that course, DeLeuit!” Jack said as he rushed down to the main deck.

Inside of Gregory’s cabin, the wooden box that had contained the quartz had ash sprinkled across it. It was glowing in a bright green hue, so bright that the clear quartz had the appearance of emeralds. Slowly, the crystals were breaking apart and beginning to reduce in size, causing the glow to become more intense.

The currents surrounding the ship increased as the winds of the storm doubled in fury. Each man now had their rain gear on, but as the swirling winds increased the rigging became more and more unstable.

“I’m losing the sails!” Mr. Whitmore cried.

“Let me help!” Gregory said.

“No, no!” Jack pushed him towards the wheel. “I’m on it. Roenick, you help Mr. Brimann!”

“Aye sir!”

Gregory was now alone on the quarterdeck as nearly every other man on board was scrambling to secure the sails, which here fluttering out of control.

He steered the ship hard to the starboard side, causing the ship to lurch as a wave caught the stern and increased the ship’s speed. Waves were shooting sea spray into the air and onto the deck.

“We’re going too fast, Jack!” Gregory cried.

Lightning flashed and caught every man off guard. One man was now dangling from a rope, his only lifeline to the riggings and a plunge to the sea below.

“Grab his hand!” Jack, who was up near the mainmast, could not reach Mr. Brimann, who was the loose man. “Hang on, Jim!”

“May the demons spare me long enough to see the prophecy unfold.” Gregory quietly muttered under his breath.

“Say again?”

Before giving an answer, Gregory fought to turn the rudder into the approaching waves. “More speed, Jack! I need more speed!”

“You’re crazy, DeLeuit! You’re crazy!”

Gregory’s cabin was bathed in green light from the quartz crystals, which were now little more than particles of sand within their case. As each crystal began to vanish into light, another blast of lightning struck the sky.

The storm tripled in intensity. "We're not going to make it!"

Waves crashed into the stern, pushing the ship further and further towards the channel.

"Yes we are!" Gregory turned the wheel, and the ship shook as the rudder struck a shallow berm. "Hang on!"

The waves overpowered the deck and covered the ship in a wash, as each man in the riggings held on tightly as they could.

The motion of the ship had ceased, and though the waves and winds were still in motion, they were not as intense as before. As the ship was still, the men slowly made their way down towards the deck.

"All hands, report!" Jack called. "Don't try to assemble, just call your name!"

"Harv Whitmore, aye!"

"William Tetson, aye!"

"Jim Bilmann, aye!"

"John Roenick, aye!"

"Don Stillman, aye!"

"Mickey Stafford, aye!"

Each other man chimed out his name and soon the four remaining crewmen were accounted for. All except one.

"Mr. DeLeuit!" Jack called. "Did anyone see him go overboard?"

"Not a sight, captain!" Tetson called.

"No sign, cap'n!"

"Man overboard! Scan the sea! Gregory, where in blazes are you?"

The men searched the ship, checking for both structural damage and their missing crewman. Upon inspection, they discovered that the main beam amid ship - the structural center of the craft - had been severely damaged. Below deck and the water line, however, the ship was sound.

There was no sign of their missing man.

"Search every room! Search overseas!"

* * *

Marianne slowly drifted off to sleep in the quiet of the tavern as lightning thundered in the distance. She jumped, but only briefly, as she rested her head upon the chart, folding her arms across Blyster Bay, just west of Valiavista Island.

She closed her eyes and did not stir again.

* * *

Twenty minutes later, the waves of the storm had all but subsided. On deck, heavy rains continued to fall.

Captain Tate and Mr. Whitmore met in Gregory's cabin, inspecting the wardrobe and the bed. Jack was standing near the hook along the wall which had once held Gregory's rucksack. The only evidence of him even being in this room, however, was a broken pane of glass in the

rear window and the outline of a small rectangle that had been seared into the wooden table.

"Nothing... not even his luggage... surely the waves didn't pull his belongings into the sea as well?" Jack asked.

"Perhaps in the storm the room was disturbed, captain?" Mr. Whitmore rocked the table, finding that the bolts that secured it to the deck had come loose. "If a wave entered this room..."

"The sheets would've been damp, Mr. Whitmore." Jack stood with his arms crossed and faced the table. "That table was loose the day I set foot on this ship, two weeks ago. I planned on fixing it when we arrived in Teraske."

"Only a broken pane of glass... even the contents of the wardrobe seem to be intact." Whitmore pulled the wardrobe doors open. To his surprise, the closet was empty. "Why...? Where is the man's knickers? His shirts? Even the bleeding hangers are gone!"

"Aye..." Jack sat down on the nearest chair.

Mr. Roenick rushed into the room from the hallway. "Captain Tate, sir! There's no sign of Mr. DeLeuit anywhere."

"These waters are shallow enough to run us aground," Jack replied softly. "But deep enough to obscure any footprints in the bottom. As soon as the rain lets up, we might want to consider going ashore."

"Captain Tate, sir, would we simply abandon the *Inspid* so quickly?" Mr. Whitmore was steadfast. "You said yourself you only walked aboard two weeks ago, sir!"

Jack shook his head. "You would lead the team towards Valiavista, Mr. Whitmore. Mr. Tetson would lead his own team towards Grand Point. We search this shore for our lost man first."

"Aye, but sir? What about you and your team, sir? You would not order us to leave you behind?"

"The tide will shift soon... Mr. Roenick and I will pilot the ship back to the harbor if you do not return by the time the tide rises."

"Aye, sir." Mr. Whitmore gave a nod.

"Aye," Mr. Roenick replied. "Captain, do you believe that Mr. DeLeuit has gone ashore?"

Jack shook his head. "I trust he has not gone far. For now, go find Mr. Tetson."

Mr. Roenick nodded and left.

"Captain, now that we are in private," Whitmore began, "I wonder if you would like to remind me of the other destination we had in mind. You told me not to repeat it to the crew, and I was true to that sentiment."

Jack nodded. "Aye, Mr. Whitmore, we were going to sail to the Nemaris Islands."

"They're cursed, sir. And I know that is why the storm struck so suddenly. The Centra Sea... it knew our plans, sir."

Jack scoffed. "It's a damn body of water, Will. No sea I've ever sailed had a mind of its own."

"Then... do you suppose the storm... could it possibly be?"

"Now is not the time for stories, Will. Even if I were to admit that was our true goal, what would the men say?" Jack looked away. "They would mutiny if I had told them the truth."

"There is no need to go to the Nemaris Islands, then? Was it you, captain, or Mr. DeLeuit who wished to go?"

"It was mine," Jack lied. "Surely you know that Gregory was the only survivor of the *CS Nemaris*, Will?"

He nodded.

“Without Gregory at the helm, I would not dare bring this ship within twenty leagues of those accursed islands. With him among us, I might’ve entertained the idea of arriving. I might’ve entertained the idea of even docking and going ashore. But without... no. No treasure is worth wresting a demon, especially one unknown and undocumented. Our task now is to salvage the ship, and maybe, just maybe, find a way to make an honest living off this part of the sea.”

“I understand, sir. Perhaps demons don’t like to be entertained,” Whitmore replied.

A knock came. “Captain, sir? Mr. Tetson has the men assembled.”

Jack gave a nod. “You have your orders, Mr. Whitmore. And keep this between us. We do not speak of this, not until I have a chance to meet with Mrs. DeLeuit, aye?”

Whitmore left for the deck. “Aye sir.”

Jack shook his head slightly. “Was this all part of yer plan, Gregory?”

* * *

Much time passes. Marianne was sitting in the window that overlooked the harbor of Harper’s Bay. She was holding onto a leather bound journal tightly. Though it was a clear, bright day, she looked out towards the lighthouse that patrolled the rocky shoals of Bard’s Point. She could see the lighthouse keeper laying out the weights and line that managed the rotation of the beacon inside the glass chamber at the top.

A knock came at her bedroom door.

“Yes?”

“Marianne?” It was Harrion Lewis. “A man has asked to see you.”

“Is it Gregory?” Marianne clutched the journal tighter. “Is it him?”

Harrion slowly shook his head and stepped aside. Captain Jack Tate entered the room.

Marianne sighed and looked back towards the window, her eyes tearing up.

“Mary, I don’t quite know how to say this.” Jack removed his hat and sat on the bed.

“I’m not sure I know how to begin.”

“You do not have to say anything, Captain Tate.” Marianne bowed her head towards the journal. “As you have returned, I will assume that your ship is intact.”

Jack nodded. “Aye, and every man of her crew returned, save for one. I do not have to tell you who that is, nor how sorry I am.”

“Three weeks, captain.” Marianne lowered the journal to reveal an ample, fuller belly. “It has been four months.”

“The repairs took longer than I anticipated... I felt to send a letter far too impersonal, and for that I apologize.” Jack removed his handkerchief and dabbed his forehead. “I understand if you hate me.”

“A part of me says that I should beat you until I can no longer feel my arms,” Marianne began. “But another part of me says that doing so would not bring him back.”

Jack nodded. “Aye. I’m sorry.”

Harrion gave a nod to the captain. “She will be safe with me, Captain Tate. I gave my word to Gregory, that she would be cared for in his absence.”

Jack nodded. “Then I had best be off.” He shook Harrion’s hand. “I cannot offer any more sincere condolences, Mary.” He started for the stairs. “Did you ever decide on a name for his heir?”

“Thomas,” Marianne replied. “If Gregory’s child is a son, we had hoped to name him Thomas. If a girl... I would name her after the great seer of Xavier, Nalia.”

Jack nodded. “Either way, I trust the child is in good hands.”

Marianne wept.

“I will show him out, Marianne. Shall I come by later for the evening service?”

Marianne continued to sob briefly.

“I’ll send Mr. Stafford, sir. My best cook. He will stand in for the chef tonight. We feel obligated.”

“Keep the noise down,” Marianne whispered.

Harrion nodded. “Leave everything to me.”

“Thank you.” Marianne continued to weep quietly.

Jack gave Harrion a nod and then descended the stairs. Harrion closed the door and followed, leaving Marianne sobbing softly.

She gazed out towards the window, where a dove flew to the window box and perched itself. Marianne gasped, and watched as it quickly left. Two more doves came and perched for a moment, leaving as suddenly as they came.

“Three doves... Gregory?” She sat up. “Gregory?”

Yet, she was still alone. The room was silent, save for the soft echo of the waves from the surf outside. She sat, bewildered, still wiping her tears.

* * *

Many months later on a tropical beachfront, surrounded by a row of palm trees, two mermaids tossed coconuts to one another. A merman sat on a rock far out in the surf and watched the distant waters for any approaching ships.

Along the shoreline, a fourth mercreature and a man were resting in the surf sitting next to one another.

“Acadia sure has grown since I last saw her,” Gregory began. “Marsha, too. They are so much like sisters. Just like Marianne’s sisters back in Elna City.”

“Yes, and Onell has done well to teach them. Though I worry that Acadia will not be able to learn as much from him as Marsha has.” Cynthia gave a soft sigh. “Gregory, you seem troubled. Ever since you arrived here, I have watched you in sorrow. What causes this sullen mood?”

“I left the men with so few answers. I am glad none of them were injured, but...” He hesitated. “Mary deserves the truth also. Cynthia, do you believe that I should’ve been more honest? To leave like that, they must’ve had many questions.”

“Answers to such questions would complicate matters, Gregory.” She stared out into the blue waters north of Nemarkis Island. “Some questions are easily answered, like when a birthday is, or when the sun will set. Other questions, like those, cannot be answered over the course of a single moment, but a lifetime.”

“I have spread many rumors of these islands, but yet, I feel that men will come for Rhydar’s treasure despite my efforts.” Gregory nodded. “Do you think that Rhydar is still here?”

“Always,” Cynthia sighed. “But Onell believes that even though you have returned to these islands, we are only safe from the demons of the past. Men from the sea may still come, and Rhydar’s Bane may still cause of trouble.”

“Pirates will always continue to earn money from the worst of deeds.” Gregory folded his hands and leaned forward, holding his green rod in his hands. “Rhydar’s treasure grew large as he continued to punish them for choosing such a life. Perhaps now I may be called upon to add to its stock, even today.”

“You are more than adequate with the magical gifts that Rhydar has granted you,” Cynthia replied. “The day your child steps foot upon these islands, however, I cannot foresee what will happen.”

“I can,” Gregory said. “Epoth will wake. And then it will be a matter of time until he appears.” He sighed. “And you’re sure my interference would disrupt that course of action? Surely I could raise my child, bring them here personally...?”

Cynthia shook her head. “I have never told you anything but truth, Gregory. Meddling with this interpretation of the future would risk more than what we have already invested. This is the safest way we to proceed.”

He nodded with a defeated expression. “My son or daughter may be destroyed while encountering Epoth. His hatred has endured for centuries and he believes only in revenge.”

“Perhaps, but there is more to that story. Neither of us will be able to prepare for his return.”

Onell looked up and dove into the water suddenly. With a splash, he was gone.

Marsha, the mermaid with the pink scales, turned and swam into the bay, resting on the sandy bottom while supporting herself above the waters. Acadia, the blue scaled mermaid, floated in the water and stared outwards.

“Marsha, what troubles you?” Cynthia asked.

“There are no ships approaching, Cynthia! Where did Onell go? Should we go and hide?”

Cynthia shook her head. “For now, take Acadia to the Cove. Continue your game there.”

Marsha nodded. “As you wish!” She then pushed herself back into the surf and swam out to Acadia. The blond mermaid shook her head indignantly, refusing to leave. The two argued for a few minutes longer before Marsha dragged Acadia underwater.

Gregory chuckled. “Acadia still has much to learn...” He turned to Cynthia, whom he had expected to laugh as well. “You’re not laughing.”

“She looks out to sea for a different reason, Gregory.” Cynthia pushed her tail up towards her chest and leaned onto her scales. “Today marks the start of a new adventure for all of us.”

“It does?”

She nodded. “Do you remember your promise?”

“To who?” Gregory asked.

Cynthia offered up a rare smile. “Think deeply, Gregory. You know of whom I speak.” She then pushed herself into the surf and swam away.

“Wait.” Gregory hesitated. He stared out towards the northwest, and the answer came to him immediately. “Marianne... yes, of course. Nine months can pass so very quickly.”

Gregory moved to his feet and held up his magic rod. With a wave and a flash of green light, he was gone.

Somewhere, far across the sea, on a warm June day, the soft cries of a child were heard in the Dancing Dragon Tavern. A boy named Thomas was born. On that day, three doves flew onto the ledge of the upstairs bedroom. They would not leave for years.

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TO BE CONTINUED

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THE BUCCANEER OF NEMARIS