

MART VAN DER HOEK

The Salted Songs of a Runaway -
DRAFT ONE

Oil and Bone Book One

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Chapter One

Nadeera Livegood hung suspended in the air, her left foot hooked hooked firmly around the kattenkop— a heavy wooden pulley nestled in the rigging, its carved shape carrying loops of rope swirling like the head of a cuttlefish. Her right foot pressed against de *boeggeest*, the emerging carved figure in the shape of a hooded mermaid pointing at the incoming horizon. The first time Nadeera saw it, she had remarked that the artist seemed more confident in their skill at carving women's torsos than the face. The crew, in turn, told her tales that the boeggeest had always been more than mere decoration. It was a spirit that guided the ship forward through sea and storm. On De Jonke Rots, this guardian's left hand turned into a two-and-a-half-meter-long pole at the bow, pointing towards opportunity-rich horizons. Nadeera was always silently amused by the fact that de boeggeest's nipples pointed as confidently towards those opportunities as well.

In de boeggeest's right hand was a tightly knotted rope held high—the other foothold Nadeera used to steady herself. Be-

tween the kattenkop and boeggeest, her body stretched in an impractical vertical split. The way she hung in the rigging seemed an addition to the spirit crafted by the same artisan that made the figurehead guiding them forward. Hopefully with more detail in the face, Nadeera thought.

She balanced effortlessly at the zenith of the ocean, the swell of the waves beneath her, surrounded by the spray of grey mist ships created by moving at high speeds. She felt everything in these moments through her outstretched legs. Each gust of artificial wind on the back of her calves, each wave's pulse in her muscles, the groaning of the ship in her bones. Her legs were built to withstand as many storms as the ship encountered, and were equally limber enough to dance and jump after these trials had settled.

Her mind, just as vast as her stance, moved similarly. A world of possibilities flowing through the open space in her skull. A spray of ocean foam struck her helmet, instantly coating the faceplate in a milky blur. Nadeera watched the bubbling water trickle down the surface, twisting in spirals, veins forming and splitting like the intricate web of thoughts she so often indulged in. Her eyes followed the trails obsessively, her mind searching for patterns in the geometry of the world. In those spirals, she thought she saw something more. Nadeera blamed the folds and spirals in one's brain on the motion of phlegm in the skull. And the more you fantasised, the richer your brain became in spirals. Which, to her, was a good thing

Nadeera ran her spear through the air, the tip of the weapon tracing the same spirals now copied in her mind. Translated

through her stacked and layered muscled arms emerging from her short sleeves, it was an emergent motion, an echo of the world around her. If the water danced interestingly, her body responded, swaying naturally, her shoulders, despite being broad and powerful as ship beams, moved with fluidity, her body trying to communicate the language of the sea. And it was because of the grace within this scar-covered mountain that made her seem less a Uzeraignian brute and more a force of nature: a tempest disguised as a woman.

She wore a hodgepodge of found sailor's clothes, the ones with the faded bold colors, stitched with the old, patched-up garments from her theatre days. Sailor's trousers that billowed out, a jacket that had once seen the spotlight now bore the salt of the sea like a secondary layer of protection, with every patch on her clothes a vestige of a not forgotten life recently past.

Nadeera had been a *moordnaar* apprentice for the past two years—a title that would have landed her in jail in her homeland, was a profession at sea. A hunter and killer of whales, vast creatures whose blubber bled the fuel for the newly discovered engines and medicines around the seas. She was damn good at being a *moordnaar* too, and now she had set her sights on her biggest bag of blubber yet.

Across the *fokselbak*, her tutor Bettie Blankendaal sat unyielding and stone-cold, watching Nadeera's every move with sharp, unforgiving eyes. A stern gaze pierced the slits of her iron helmet. Bettie, hunched like a salt-crusted *boeggeest* herself, clutched her coiled harpoon in one hand and a taut vertical rope in the other. Her only rhythm came from the slow inflation and

deflation of the stitched balloons on her breathing helmet. They deflated with soft squeaks, a mechanical breath whose sound once made Nadeera stifle a childish laugh— until Bettie issued a warning from their first hunt:

“If you meet other moordnaars in your life, you will find their demeanor similar to mine. Distractions from the hunt have led all the non-stoic moordnaars to an early grave. Stoicism is the norm for moordnaars. Remain the norm. Or get killed.”

Bettie liked the norm. It was a warm blanket of passive protection for her. Why would she question the thing that kept her alive, that held her best interests? To her, the norm was not to be questioned.

Nadeera rolled the worldview through her head. Perhaps all moordnaars are stoic because they trained each other to be? Was it truly because free-roaming thought was considered fatal? Those same scattered thoughts that had once given her a career as a performer? Or maybe because Bettie’s predecessors found previous non-norm people annoying when creating the norm?

Nadeera’s mind always had the tendency to autocannibalize, asking questions others would consider annoying, becoming both sides of the argument, and coming out of these lapses alerted that it had apparently been too long in the conversation without her response, so she would then vomit the regurgitated inner dialogue to her conversation partner. Who then almost always graced her with an answer because people could not resist explaining something to someone as genuinely curious as Nadeera. It also helped that she was nice to look at, turning

her wandering mind into more of a boon— Which lead to her barfing her conclusion towards Bettie. “The norm is the base case, made to be deviated from.”

“Sure” Bettie answered. “As long as your harpoon trajectory is steady.”

Her hypothesis on the effectiveness of her wandering mind would be put to some extremes today, for she was a moordnaar on the hunt to kill a whale, and there is a reason stoicism is the norm for moordnaars.

* * *

The sea rose with a slow, deliberate heave. Some ancient thing beneath the hull had grown tired of being still and out of breath.

A sharp voice moved with rhythm through the ship: “Kno-k’l! stuur’n-bard! T-wei pla-nk ‘n diep! Half- skeeps-‘lengt! Hon-drd-ertig ton-nuhr! Joek’l!”

Nadeera flinched. The syllables dropped into the still water of her mind. Punching through slurred vowels. The Oseanespraak language is a coarse grain, able to be understood through chattering teeth clenched in cold, through the thundering waves.

Pelle-Pepijn Polampalam stood atop the mast, swaying like a scarecrow drunk on wind and smear liquor. His eyes, though bloodshot, could see through mist and nightmare. He was a maststaander, and maststaanders trained their minds to calculate depth, distance, and assess threat in metrics the rest of the crew could not fathom. Nadeera once asked how he spoke while so permanently intoxicated. He’d smiled and said.

“None of us speak the same, Naddie. We all translate. Measurements, ideas, wit— all these strange ideas swirling in the air we turn into rhythm. Make it mean something to each other. Maststaanders just have more things to communicate, and then we choose to have a smaller vocabulary to say it”

Pelle-Pepijn was stingy with his vowels, sailors were expected to pay the difference. “Knokkel. Starboard. Two planks deep. Half the ship’s length. Hundred-thirty tonner. Joekel.” A beast that size toppled ships with its arrival. Pelle-Pepijn did not say joekel lightly. Nadeera imagined the scale of the body they were hunting.

Nadeera’s idle thoughts broke like foam against the sudden tilt of the deck. Her instincts faster than her mind could catch up. She gripped the boeggeest tight, legs bracing on impulse. Her body had trained itself to survive long before her misplaced thoughts caught up— her mind wandered too often for it to be trusted with timing. She once was told by an admiring army medic that she had a sense of proprioception, he called it “a separate nervous system that allowed her body to move of its own accord. Her reflexes were so finely tuned that they seemed to exist independently of her conscious mind.” Bettie appreciated the kind words he had once whispered to make her feel more comfortable with her violently spasming limbs. And she appreciated that in this moment her non-cooperating body now saved her.

Across from her, Bettie Blankendaal remained crouched like a gargoyle, not swaying, not blinking, only tensing. She hadn’t missed the rise, her gaze too focused— she was simply waiting for the landing.

The Jonke Rots groaned. The ship was lifted by a beast too large to understand its own strength. A sound like the bones

of an old man echoed through the hull, timber straining under pressure, joints aching with pain. Nadeera's patchwork armor banged against the kattenkop, knocking the wind from her lungs. Her heart surged with pain, and her veins bloomed, hungry for her blood's blue fire— but her mind made active efforts to not let it out. She refused to give her body control.

Then came a second voice. This voice did not need a special method of speaking to communicate its intent, it did not expect you to decipher, it expected you to obey through sheer volume alone.

“ZET BORST AEN-” It rattled through the bruised ribcage of Nadeera, and echoed through the cartilage of De Jonke Rots. A Scheepsoord expression of preparing yourself for something awful. The disoriented crew tried quickly to gather their sea legs, but they weren't as fast as Nadeera.

She stood quickly— too quickly for her own comfort, as sparkling lights flashed under her eyelids— but fast enough that none of the crew saw her stumble. Standing this way she would be limber enough to anticipate the impact of the ship returning into the unforgiving ocean. It would still hurt like a motherfucker, but her relaxed calves were more prepared to take the blow than her crackable ribs. Nadeera heard the ship's pain— the smacking of bodies hitting the creaking wooden deck of De Jonke Rots, with crew groaning across the deck, ribs bruised, breath knocked loose. She doubled her grip on the spear. She appreciated that the beast made it more personal. Blue blood would flow today, her body sent shivers of anticipation.

“Unless both yer legs and both yer arms are broken you can still work! Now go and grab some rope and bring it to Silbrand! We're going to need more knots!”

Batu Apemouw. Ploegleider. Blunt force wrapped in chest hair

and dried sinew. You'd be mad to question him, and suicidal to ignore him. A groan weakly fluttered from the deck in protest.

"Did I fucking stutter?" Batu growled. "Those with broken legs better be ready to swab whale guts from the deck when this is over!"

The crew limped to obey, and hunt had officially begun.

* * *

Retaliatory harpoons were chucked from the moordnaars, each one missing their intended target, the whale changing directions with such speed that it made it hard to anticipate a trajectory for Nadeera's calculating mind. Missed harpoons retrieved by cranking pulleys attached to her hands.

Batu spotted Nadeera and Bettie standing firm. His jaw clenched around a piece of dried leathery meat, rolling up his sleeves. Moving to his spot at the center of the deck, where the wood did the shouting for him.

Nadeera had once stood in this same spot for twenty minutes in silence. There voices of the ship would come alive— Hear the pompman Amlissa working below, the squeaking of Bettie's mask and her breath hidden underneath, every nook and cranny had her ear, only stopped towards the kaptein's quarters by a wall of overlapping whispers. Sound bent around that dreadful space. Batu's spot was a familiar place for her, the centre of an amphitheater, where the world did revolve around you.

But Batu could do something in that spot that Nadeera could not fathom, he was able to throw his voice like a harpoon to the ears deserving of his command. The black smoke of magic did not surround him when he did this, this was a skill he trained

his lips and lungs to perform— The command aimed at Nadeera was intended to pierce her hesitation. “Zet ‘m op, strijder, the seas carry you still” he said softly. A platitude sailors would normally tell each other to pretend to be encouraging. Words that if they were spoken without his voice would ring hollow. Instead, Nadeera’s body moved instinctually again. She threw her spear towards the whale. The point struck with a clang but bounced off. No purchase.

Salt spires. She’d seen them before— knokkel whales wore armor made from hardened crystalline salt, shaped like jagged hexagons across their hides. The older the beast, the thicker the plating. Lucky bastards could deflect a well-aimed harpoon just by being old.

Bettie croaked a curse and hit the winch on Nadeera’s right arm. The rope attached to the spear rewound with a clean zip back into her grasp. They looked annoyed at each other, these spires would slow down Bettie’s time to kill significantly, and being mad at Nadeera was more practical than being angry at a whale that just grew that way.

Nadeera frustratingly thought back to the motto her generals once beat into their soldiers: “The only acceptable death is one achieved in the pursuit of perfection.” But Bettie taught her a motto more useful, a lesson she kept in her heart every time she missed her throw:

“A fast reload is worth more than a fancy throw.”

Moordnaars faced with these setbacks evolved their arsenal with numerous spears, javelins, hooks, saws, knives, hammers, and, particularly useful in this case, a koetand: a curved implement designed to crack under and pop a knokkel’s crystalline armor off. Moordnaars enjoyed the sound and violence in the action. Bettie especially. She was now scrounging through her

tools, hands fumbling excitedly through her ornate implement's box beneath the kattenkop.

Nadeera had never used anything beyond the spear and rope she was issued. Bettie hoarded her arsenal, doling out experience through bloodcovered mistakes alone. A type of tutelage ineffective for Nadeera, but she could not argue with the results booked once they got to work. Bettie popped up from the fokselbak with her evil koetand in hand and twisted a dial on her mask, with it came a pop filled by loud hissing. Her lessons in stoicism slowly draining from her as the zout-fueled mania started taking over. With a whiff of the drug she turned into the primal idea of a hunter, with fevered glee she lunged forward now, squatting deep like a beast on the prowl, shoulders bouncing with rhythmic convulsions as a rasping laugh rattled out of her.

Normally in the plays Nadeera had seen, maniacal laughter during a life-or-death encounter would cue the audience that hope was lost. But the theater never prepared you for the hunt. That laugh? That was the sound of Bettie's cocktail kicking in. Euphoria and instinct coiled tight. Her mind spiraling the other way to see panic as pleasure, fear as fuel. Business as usual for a moordnaar.

"Strijders up front! Are we ready to leap into the jaws of our enemy below?" Batu's voice cleaved through the chaos happening between the two moordnaars.

Nadeera flinched, she was not. But her mind blurted instincts picked up from her army days. "No, sir!"

"Sir?" Batu growled. "Sir? Hey strijders! Fancy Miss Nadeera thinks I am a prim and proper Sir!"

The crew and waves stilled to listen. He spat the word sir like it burned. "I did not chew my way through rope, zout, and brine

to be called a Sir. Our mother did not feed me ice-cold pap and drown our brothers and sisters for me to be called Sir!”

His chest ballooned with a deep inhale— the full six seconds, always the same way when someone forgot to properly address Batu. Nadeera counted each second, as she had since she was first rebuked under his breath. Sometimes the words would switch, but the performance was always the same. She wondered if he practiced this whole speech when alone.

He turned, perfectly on cue. “And why am I not a Sir?”

“For our mother is the sea, and she is a bitch who did not raise proper people!” the crew howled.

“So what does that make me?”

“Batu Hannes Apemouw! Son of a bitch!” the crew roared in response, the curse they uttered hung in the air and coalesced into a barely visible cloud of combined fervor.

“Then let us together kill our brother whale in the water, and show the sea how she raised us!”

He pointed with three fingers snapped into place by habit and design. A foul black smoke hissed from his pores and curled through the air, combining with the cloud that formed from the crew. It streaked like ink between Bettie and Nadeera before pointing them toward the knokkelwhale. A ritual familiar to those at sea that faced hardship, Batu was carving an empathic bond made from the zeal of his own crew. Like a ploegleider is supposed to.

“Your orders are unchanged: Bring me our bounty, strijders.” With those words, Batu finished his witchcraft.

The tether magic yanked tight jittering with smoke between the moordnaar’s skulls. Nadeera gasped— suddenly she felt it. The mad glee that spiked in Bettie’s veins, the laughter with razors underneath. It raced through her, uninvited.

She giggled in shared ecstasy. Bettie, now with Nadeera's calculating patterns through her mind, snorted with amusement. Handing Nadeera a second koetand.

"Let us pop some knokkels," Bettie grinned.

* * *

As useful as the bond was, it didn't come without complications. The sudden rush of shared sensation made Nadeera's already reckless body even harder to reason with. Her instincts thrilled at Bettie's bloodlust, and her rational mind struggled to stay seated at the wheel. It was like two parents with opposing philosophies trying to raise one unruly, euphoric child.

The knokkelwhale was strafing to the side of the two huntresses, tilting the ship once more through its size. Bettie instinctively used Nadeera's steady legs as support to spot another angle of attack. One thick knokkel above the brow. The whale went underwater again to build pace.

With it's disappearance their bond hummed hotter as they inherently understood each other's approach.

"I'll go high," Nadeera murmured without talking. "I'll go wide," Bettie answered before the thought finished forming.

Perfect untrained synchronicity between their two instincts braided in magic.

The knokkel whale breached partly with a feint— churning the starboard side of the ship with its flukes, massive spiral scars of jagged salt scratched deadly gashes into the wood of De Jonke Rots. Which now during its countertilt pushed into the whale. As the ship started to bounce back upright to try and fling the crew, Bettie clicked a button in her harpoon locking it in place. Interlocking with Nadeera's arm who was about to overcorrect

her movement into the ocean. They nodded to one another as the ship righted itself, losing all forward momentum.

The whale moved slightly away from the ship and turned towards De Jonke rots with its mouth opened wide enough to swallow the prow. Rows of blue salt-glass shards glinted beneath its baleen, crusted with bloody calcium. Something old was forming in its throat.

“That’s not a maw of hunger,” Nadeera muttered. “He’s gonna splinter us!”

“That’s a grudge,” Bettie whispered back, eyes wide. “Bastard has boat sinking magic.”

The whale roared, churning the water underneath the ship into the cracks formed by its scraping. Removing the water underneath to make the ship capsize faster. The ship now shifting slowly sideways towards the expecting beast.

From above, Pelle-Pepijn flung three blessed iron rings into the air. They spun, hung for half a second, then clinked back into his hands. Foretelling an omen.

“Two clicks down, one turned” he called, cryptically as always. Nadeera had always been dreadfully unaware of all the arcane different from Uzeraigne war magics.

Batu knew the omens well. He spat on the deck for good luck, raised his arms like sails, and shouted:

“Seize and Shred!”

The deck exploded into motion. Lines flew towards the maw. Chains whipped around its teeth. Hooks launched into its knokkels. Nadeera sprinted along the rail, teeth clenched to brace her skull against the air pressure and brainchurning howl emanating from the whale. Bettie followed right behind her, snarling and grinning so wide her gums bled.

“Angle for the cheeks!” Nadeera shouted. “No. go for ‘t Oor-

gat!” Bettie corrected mid-leap.

They both leap weightlessly. Bone-and-sinew extensions of the ship’s fury.

Nadeera’s koetand hit first. It sunk into a seam of pale crystal just under it’s left auditory ridge. With a crack like breaking permafrost, the plate shattered. Shards flew into the air, slicing Nadeera’s cheek.

The behemoth bucked, not accounting for the speed of the moordnaar duo.

Bettie had already moved there. and dug into the exposed cartilage beneath the plate. She screamed with joy as she tore into tendons above the flippers. Blood geysered over her, black, silver, and ancient. Her long awaited shower.

The creature thrashed in response. But Nadeera and Bettie already tied their ropes around the freed spire.

“Now now now now!” They felt the ship surge with renewed vigor. Batu was masterful at ordering his sailors around. Ropes pulled taut, and the roerdraaiier Fransje pulled a lever to empty another bag of captured wind into the sails that were now parallel with the prow. Trying to pull the knokkel fully off with the leverage provided by Nadeera’s koetand.

The monster dipped, half-submerging, but couldn’t dive. Its left flipper spasmed from the severed nerves. The beast started spinning to try and get the moordnaars into the water.

Nadeera clung to the knokkel’s face trying not to sink, her body slick with brine, her vision swimming from too many minds speaking at once. She couldn’t tell if Bettie was still beside her, inside her, or part of her. Her own hands betrayed her by letting go of her hold, trying to pull implements from Bettie’s belt. And with a loud and violent crack Nadeera and Bettie sank underneath the beast. Nadeera went under first. And Bettie was

flung against the spires across the back to eventually be scooped up and under by another spire on the right fin.

After the sound came eerie silence. As the beast stopped moaning and thrashing to slowly spin back upright, the crew stared in awe as they saw Nadeera with her two implements buried in the spires flip herself upright at the apex of the whale's rotation. Only to be even more amazed by Bettie doing the same with only her jagged whalecarver boots on the opposite flank of the whale.

Nadeera's chisel had been the source of the cracking noise as it rang out like a blacksmith's hammer on saltbone. Her other hand had slammed a dagger into a groove beside it. Driven into the salt by Bettie's shared experience in their bonded brains. They caught a quick breath and tried to prepare themselves from the next attack. But the whale relentlessly furthered its assault.

His back contracted. Saltplates flexed and rippled. The muscle groups beneath the moordnaars' feet could churn and crush like tectonic plates. One wrong move and their legs would be shattered, their bodies folded into paste between slabs of living stone. Nadeera and Bettie had to duck low and weave in between the spires of salty death.

They'd been like this on whales before, yes. But never one like this. Never one like Fort.

The name formed instinctively in Nadeera's mind, and she felt Bettie laugh at the idea from within. Nadeera had named all the whales she had killed so far. Each name came from a minor character in one of the plays Nadeera had once written—Fort was a young mercenary with too much armor and too little dialogue in a propagandistic piece she had to make for the empire.

You're not serious, you name these bastards? Bettie thought. I try to find names that fit, Nadeera replied.

They both realised the other hadn't spoken aloud to have this aside. But were quickly interrupted by another shift in salt trying to crush them. He shifted his spinal plates to block their angles of attack, folding flesh to thicken around critical spots. Fort was apparently a seasoned veteran, but Nadeera had already picked his name, it was too late to change.

With Fort changing tactics Nadeera's mind tried to spiral new ideas in between attacks, ideas too reckless to try. These ideas filled Bettie with a rush of possibilities. Who now realised she could get something out of empathic bonds from others. Bettie usually gave a lot more in these bonds than she received. Being flooded with drug-fueled psychosis does not invite the other party to be as willing to share thoughts.

How can she focus through the fumes? she thought.

Reckless ideas flooded Bettie's mind. Strategies no sober whaler would try. Fantasies of bloody spectacle plucked from Nadeera's theatric mind. And with a self-satisfied grin she saw some of them possibilities. Despite Bettie's dead black eyes induced from drugs, Nadeera saw in them a familiar conviction.

Fort arched again. The head rose, the spires curved, and the tail came crashing towards Fort's nose. Nadeera seized her chance. She leapt to escape crushing, and flung Bettie's chisel with her arm still attached violently into the next spire down the spine. With this speed she bruised two of her ribs. A familiar pain, but no less cruel for being known.

Within the same moment Bettie jumped in lockstep. Throwing her arm around the central spire encasing Fort's heart towards Nadeera to grab in return. They saw themselves smile through each other's eyes. Nadeera found empathic bonding more than

just a tool, it was intimate to her. Seeing yourself through someone else's eyes. Maybe that's why everyone likes me, because I see them as beautiful.

Except I see Balthasar as a malevolent spirit, Batu as a profiteering general. I even saw Bettie as a stoic gargoyle. Maybe it was a B-named curse Nadeera hypothesised.

Within her hypothesis she could feel a scratching in her skull searching for more ideas, accompanied with the clear voice of Bettie.

You're such a zooitje sometimes, but now I feel your thought process it finally clicked for me. Bettie thought to Nadeera. Your head's a mess filled with shards of porcelain trying to form teacups through loose association.

Nadeera flushed with shame. Rearranging her head into something more manageable. The reorganisation by Bettie's stern protestation.

No! Don't fuck it up now..., Bettie corrected. There's art in this mess. Makes me want to dance to avoid stepping on shards. It makes me feel... free. Free enough to not second guess this next stupid idea.

A flash of movement from Bettie snapped Nadeera awake, instinctually Nadeera grabbed the air before she saw the rope being thrown, not knowing how to reply, she just tightened it around the heartspire. Take a deep breath Bettie commanded we're going under.

They strapped themselves in anticipation to the spine as Fort dove. Bettie guessed correctly.

The sea swallowed them whole. Small bubbles released from the two as they struggled to conserve limited breath. Pressure built quickly on top of their ears as Fort dragged them below the deepest they have ever been, towards the slijk— an underwater

current of grey ooze, moving as ribbons of smoke. Whenever someone would swim in the open water they could sense the presence of the slijk just below their feet, no matter how deep they actually swam, and although its existence was familiar, the terror never dulled. Raw slijk could do unspeakable things to one's brain. And to one's body it could dissolve, burn. It was death in liquid form.

But when Nadeera looked directly beneath the terror — she saw beauty.

Colors swirled in between the grey void: subtle combinations an artist would spend decades trying to exactly match, but this one impression would last forever. Tiny flickers of hue and light, like a stained glass window melting in thick tar.

Beautiful, right? Bettie's thought came in slow, distorted through a syrupy haze now occupying their minds. The end of all of us. Just a ship's length down.

She grabbed on to her golden earring. A memory from three generations ago. She'd seen this ooze at one and a half shiplengths. Through the earring she felt the lifetime end, consumed by slijk.

It's coming up to swallow us, Bettie whispered, melancholically.

Fort dove and spun upside down to dip its spire slowly with the attached moordnaars into the slijk. The bond throbbed with shared wonder, as the possibility of killing Fort and surviving the harvest grew smaller in both their minds. Cutting the rope loose would make them targets in Fort's domain. But remaining attached would have them disintegrated in the slijk. They felt Fort slow its approach towards the grey ooze, an alchemical death he was bringing to them.

Bettie grinned through cracked lips, she considered Fort

worthy of killing her.

They ducked away from the saltspire's tip again— now slick with bubbling ooze boiling the salt. Smoke hissed from bursting bubbles. Needle-thin black spikes solidified towards the humans' approach.

Nadeera reached out to the strange formation in an attempt to analyze. She wanted to feel its apparent sharpness and heat. But a blanket of cold and silence enveloped her instead.

Bettie gasped at the sudden emptiness where Nadeera had once been, exhaling some of her precious held breath, and in a panicked effort tried breathing underwater, sucking in a boiling bubble of dark clouds.

The Snufzout mask hissed alchemically, the slijk reaching the salt in her worn containers. Her mask rapidly started cooking. Superheated metal seared her cheek. The pain helped her refocus to not scream in agony. She pulled the mask off, but the skin around her lips and chin came with it. And although she refused to breathe in more water. Her brain made a sensation it could only interpret as scent.

Something other than her own melting skin and boiling salt— but something far more alien: something sweet. A scent that brought up memories of a previous life ending in drowning. It filled her lungs, even as they begged for clean air. And the earring she wore to remember previous lives spun rapidly through her ear. The friction bruising her skin and scattering blood. She coughed to remove the foreign air from her lungs, and steam bubbled past her. Bettie was moving towards a burning unconsciousness, being boiled from the inside out.

Nadeera had not noticed Bettie's predicament and absence from her mind. She was transfixed with the slijk. A tendril reached out from the ooze— black coils, twitching tentacles

mirroring her movement. Forming a twisted reflection of her own curious hand.

It wants to shake mine, Nadeera thought. How very formal.

Bettie, still dangling and cooking, watched with horror. This was not the way slijk was supposed to react, and with lingering motes of curiosity from Nadeera's faded bond. She fought to remain conscious of what happened next.

* * *

Fourteen meters above, the captain of De Jonke Rots— Kaptein Balthasar Droogstoppel stood half-naked and aflame, calmly lighting a cigar of dried inkweel and herbs using his own burning fingers. From every tear duct, nostril, and pore of his exposed back, heavy black smoke rolled down like incense. His lit fingers carved sigils into the ship's deck. The smoke recoiled into shadow puppets of frightening figures.

As kaptein, he had duties beyond command— One of them was the rite of parley.

With sacrifice he would try and broker a bargain with sprookjes from beyond the veil, he was now in conversation with one called de Slangeman. The second Nadeera and Bettie disappeared below, Balthasar had stepped outside of his silent cabin and asked the ship's Knopenlegger, Silbrand: "Undo last month's knots. And do it with many regrets in your heart" And like a condemned man, Silbrand unraveled every rope and knot he'd laid over four long weeks of obsessive looping.

And when the final knot loosed on the deck, Balthasar recited his request in rhythmic Oseanespraak:

Slangeman | De langschte man | wat vinde je van | mijn darmen dan? Slangeman | Als het Kan | pak ze 'an | breng

mijn Jan | van mij van dan | spik en span | op deescher plank |
Slangeman | O Slangeman |

Silbrand painfully dumped the end of one of the ropes overboard. They surged into the sea with a snapping scream, and De Jonke Rots listed dangerously as a kilometer of rope rose— twisting itself into a serpent’s knot. The crew cursed in motivation, water gushed across the deck, and the poem left.

Beneath the waves, Fort the knokkel descended painfully slow, careful not to disintegrate its own flesh

The grey slijk formed the arms of an expecting dance partner. One had already wrapped around Nadeera’s pulley mechanism covered hand. Causing the glove to dissolve into drifting flakes, but the mechanical parts remained. Her other hand now also bare, and a gentle touch caressed her in a familiar intimacy— a tenderness she felt a decade ago.

“Momat?” she breathed, forgetting her lungs were not safe. Air was poison, and her mask had gently melted from her face, leaving no exit wounds.. The slijk was already in her mouth. She had invited it in with a playful bite on the simulacrum’s thumb.

Fort exhaled another ballast, lowering them closer to the ocean floor. A molasses drip death for the two killers. Nadeera was heading blissfully aware to her unmaking, but saw a rapid movement that refocussed her concentration.

She saw Bettie moving with intense speed in an arc of motion, grappled by the serpentine ropes, the ones that anchored Bettie to Nadeera unmade in the speed, de Slangeman in full force, started dragging her in a corkscrew upwards, the rope taut in an absurd spiral. Unchoreographed and desperate it tried

grabbing Nadeera as well. But the slijk held the serpent steady across Fort's plating, and Nadeera was now caught in the tug-of-war between slime and salvation. Her legs inbetween crushed against salt-armored hide. Her right shoulder pulled from its joint with a dull, internal scream. Muscle tore, bone bent far beyond tolerance.

Slangeman acknowledged the struggle and let loose Nadeera who snapped into the side of Fort, with the elasticity of the slijk strong enough to cause the impact of Nadeera to shove the whale closer to its own unmaking. Nadeera was cushioned by the soft belly of Fort, free of knokkels. Through blood oozing out of the scratches on her arms the slijk embraced her.

Slangeman coiled upwards and deposited Bettie on the branded spot on the deck. An unimpressed Balthasar glared at the mass of Slangeman, the rope unfurled its own fibers to create a sound that resembled hissing. Balthasar opened his mouth with a considerable amount of mismatching teeth—"Consider our bargain changed, demon. Return Nadeera to me – alive. We'll negotiate your payment based on how many pieces she arrives in." And before Batu could object to the callousness of the request, Slangeman dove downwards again. Tilting the ship again.

— —

Nadeera lay in Fort's lap with a liquid resembling acid pouring into her veins, a feeling of discomfort, but it did not hurt. She chalked it up to her body refusing to report the damage to the brain. There was no point in knowing. The slijk writhed with strange purpose. Forming bumps under Nadeera's not-yet-destroyed skin. Bumps that moved up her neck and bulged her cheeks. It was a succumbing sensation she bathed herself in. In the sensory deprivation a familiar voice reached out:

"I knew you would find me." the voice of Momat spoke to her, impossibly "Nadi, come swim with me."

The voice swirled inside the folds of her brain. A headache massaged the inside of her skull. Her lungs filled with acrid sweetness, familiar scents carried memories of loud market-places. She tried to reach for a necklace, a reflex from ten years of mourning— only to find her arms tingling in slumber.

"I'm sorry," she thought, forming three-dimensional letters of carved granite to communicate. "I don't think I can, you're not really here."

"I'm with you back then. And now your then is here now." said the voice, negotiating its existence "What's the difference? As long as we're together. Come swim, like we were about to."

"I don't understand," she trailed the words with a finger in proverbial sand. The grains spoke the words aloud in her voice. "You are gone, you are a memory, a pleasant one. But not tangible."

Nadeera felt her hand caressed and held tightly. With the rubbing of a thumb for comfort, they way he held her hands. Her mind even filled in that his palms were nervously sweating. Her body twitched. Forcing her to experience her actual sensations. Not the ones occurring in her fantasy, she stared at thick wires jutting from her pores, forming a network of coils that pulsed feeling into her hand. "Is that not tangible, Nadi? I'm as real as any other memory you've experienced before." The smells twisted into new sensations. A spice-filled dinner enjoyed with her fathers at the dinner table. Entire conversations and evenings experienced in her fleeting conscious moments "Nadeera-sweecham, has it not been too long since you sat like this with us? But still it feels like yesterday! Come eat with us" said the voice of her sweet father, Unda.

“Do you not miss our practices of rhetoric and deconstructions of social-economic theory?” Said Thryst, with his unwavering tone. It even had the twinge of incredulity he said most things with. And like always, her fathers were right. She did miss Thryst’s annoying specificity in things. It had been too long since having these normal nights. And it was all here. Just as she left it. Regret seeped in, and with it the slijk curled into another memory.

Nadeera felt hard stage lights sear her retinas, her feet in slightly too tight dancing shoes. Ears filled with orchestral music. And the shivers went through her spine. Although this was a nervewracking performance, she never felt it during the performance. These shivers were not part of the memory, fear came from knowing what came next. An actor dressed like the costumed mercenary she had once written to be named Fort came to her to calm her down. “Fear is not necessary, miss Livegood. Although the memories are real, you can do whatever you want here.” The fake mercenary gave her a fake sword intended for Fort’s fake death in his next scene. It could not be real if she could change it. An event this significant can not be changed. She walked out to the water at the edge of her floating stage. She saw the massive figure coming from below this time, something she never had done before. Her hand gripped the pommel of the painted sword that felt too real. “How nice would it be if things were different this time, think of the others you could now make more memories with.”

Nadeera stood still as the jaws of the beast widened from below, readying to swallow the coulisse with her fellow performers. And here she was with the ability to warn them, wondering if it would affect reality, since it had already happened in reality. A pivotal event like this should not be actively misremembered,

She felt unlike herself if she were to continue without it, delusional to think she could change a memory. And Thryst, Unda, and especially Momat would not accept her falling to delusion. So she raged against the slijk, for the sake of their memories still being her own.

Nadeera's body let loose her final failsafe, with her mind compromised she turned to her heart. Letting the valves open hidden compartments of azure blood Thryst and Unda had fought so hard to procure. And with violent beats of her heart destructive blood rushed into her. It crystallized mid-flow when intercepting, forming jagged darts that skewered the parasitic globs of slijk. Shards of glass emerging from her veins. The pain was now no longer metaphysical, it woke her grey matter enough to repel the voices originating from within that were not hers.

In this same violent rage, Nadeera plunged Bettie's dagger into Fort's hide, her memory of the stageprop behind the intent to kill. With her lingering delusion she felt another bond of empathy form in her head.

With something new and vast.

Fort.

—————
 "You are too foolish to understand," the knokkel whale yelled in agony, with the hurt he was feeling. The wound Nadeera planted in him she felt in her own stomach. A slow flood of grief and fury filled her chest— Fort's foreign emotions. More delusions she would expel.

"I erred in my judgement." Fort wailed in deep pain. "I should have crushed you before. I sensed sympathy when you gazed at my ancestors. I saw the hand of a killer hesitating. I had then hoped you would understand."

“You thought you knew what I lost. You say you tried to teach us, and when we tried to learn you sold us death cloaked in lies. What else to do but reach for a knife?” Nadeera tried moving away from her precarious position, but was held in place by coils of slijk holding her right arm tightly. Not willing to let her go.

“That is not how the ancestors work.” Fort chastised Nadeera. They both were shocked by the rapid approach of Slangeman heading downwards gripping around Nadeera to try and complete its bargain.

The writhing serpent-rope pulled upwards. Guided toward the mark on the ship. But the slijk held steady. And enveloped Nadeera’s entire lower arm, Jagged shards of blue blood shot through Nadeera’s skin and spun around trying to remove the slijk’s control. In this moment all participants in the tug-of-war had the same realization. The slijk started to dissolve towards muscle, the blood crystallized the lower protuberance of bone that connected to the upper arm, intending the bone to shatter. And Slangeman just pulled. Something had to give according to the demon. Nadeera looked at her decoupling lower arm swallowed by the dark and apologized as she looked away. A pain so unbelievable rushed up her spine, which was quickly followed by the sudden silence of pain. Nadeera wondered for a moment how she could feel pain in a limb that was no longer attached. And de Slangeman pulled her quickly upwards.

Nadeera now stared at the flank of Fort, whose hate-and-blood-shot eye glared at its next target, looking right past her. Wanting to smash it with the full, dying mass of his body. Realising his intent was being shared through the bond, he acted fast hoping to catch up with Nadeera.

Nadeera had to put on a mask, knowing her thoughts were no longer safe. She became a facsimile of her days in the

army, when you couldn't allow sorcerers to know where your next strike would take place. The blue blooded soldiers of the Uzeraigne empire developed a technique of absentmindedness. Tactics would enter your head in the moment you would perform them, already too late for a mindreader to react to.

Her ruined body felt the tiny oscillations of the pulling rope, and her violent heart beat in similar lockstep. She saw the ship's mast tilt in an aggressively acute angle. That great bundle of sentient rope could move the ship with ease, and Nadeera was the anchor, the anchor that forced De Jonke Rots to lay still in the path of the wicked beast. Without thought she coiled her left arm with the tendrils of Slangeman, almost a ship's length around her from her shoulder to her wrist. And with the final twist she severed her connection with the ship once more, now armed with a nest of rope.

Nadeera's blood hardened in her veins, weighing her down towards Fort and helping her brace for landing, now perched on the front salt island like Bettie once stood in the fokselbak, she grabbed a lodged harpoon between the tectonics. And started wrapping rope around it.

"You think you can cross the ocean with one fin removed and no ship?" Fort mocked. Nadeera held her composure, not wanting the mask to slip. Fort continued "Beached against the hard belly of your allies."

The ship groaned as the Serpent pulled down. Nadeera loaded her remaining gauntlet with rope and listened for her heartbeat. Buried in her chest for four years resurfaced her blood magic. If those memories of her past could affect her still, then so too would her ancient adrenaline be hers again. Her muscles

tightened. The damned blood flowed again through her, moved her with such violence that if her ex-soldier's body had not kept in shape by labor at sea, she would have ripped herself apart with the force of her leap.

Using the momentum of Fort, she launched upward with streaks of blood and water. Not wasting momentum, she hurled her harpoon toward the horizon and commanded her blood to move up the rope. Blue liquid surged from her many wounds, crawling with thick arcs along the rope towards the tip of the harpoon, then crystallized into denser material. Nadeera's sizeable frame physically deflated, now with so much of her body's content now crusting the harpoon that it outweighed her. She yanked the cord on her winch with her teeth. And pulled herself towards her own thrown projectile.

The crew stared with mouths agape at the physics-defying Nadeera. Kapitein Balthasar, seeing a limb missing from Nadeera, roared at his summoned demon, "Spik en span, Slangeman! Remember your promises!"

The ropes unfurled and vibrated their fibers in an angry hiss, pursuing like a musket shot after Nadeera across the deck from port to stern. Batu shouted, "Brace!" realizing that De Slangeman had yet to fulfill its end of the deal: deliver the submerged moordnaars to the plank the kapitein had marked. As long as Nadeera kept outpacing the Slangeman, the bargain was incomplete. The serpent pulled the ship laterally, diverting it from Fort's oncoming rampage.

The crew cowered in awe. Nadeera smiled at them with the mask of the Battle Dancer. She was a warrior born of blue blood, yes— but also an artist. And artists need bravado in moments where they take centre stage. Fort's speed caused them to breach beautifully, and from Nadeera's perspective she saw her action

as a true masterwork. The composition of the spiralling rope heading towards her. Although she lay horizontally from the force of her throw. Thanks to the pulling of Slangeman, the deck of De Jonke Rots was parallel with her feet, scooping water. And behind the ship, closer than she would have liked, breached the monstrous Fort, a majestic scene lit well by the spray of ocean foam. And reflecting shimmers of sunlight.

After absorbing the moment, she forced her external blood to re-enter, and was caught by Slangeman simultaneously and flung onto the deck annoyed, if bundles of rope were capable of expressing that emotion. Balthasar glared disappointedly at the stump where Nadeera's right arm had once been. And as a final act of malicious compliance, Slangeman stopped her bleeding by stitching themselves into her gushing elbow, fiber entered flesh and ceased the pain. Knotting itself into a magical monkey's fist now dangling from her right upper arm.

Nadeera's body wanted her mind to give up the hunt. But seeing Batu and Jandrie buried underneath rubble, made her redouble her focus. Those fleeting moments of clarity had to still be hers while she was still on the hunt, while she still had to protect. The splash from Fort's breach hit her face as Balthasar approached, untouched by the chaos, patting her shoulder. "Spik en Span, my ass." he growled towards the air. Treasured few words from a kaptein who only spoke to Batu and Fransje. Even if half of them were in a language she barely understood, and the other half were the words: 'my ass.'

He turned around and patted Bettie as well, who filled with vigour seeing Nadeera, and began pacing around the ship, lost in thought in the midst of a life or death battle, a wandering mind must be an asset for a kaptein. What a nice norm to have. Nadeera thought. Shaken by a burn marked Bettie, who lifted

Nadeera in joy with fleeting strength, only to place her down quickly when judgmental glances came from the crew. The whale still lived. No celebration yet for our moordnaars. Bettie was also not the hugging type, Nadeera pondered.

The crew glanced overboard towards the ambitious Fort, who redoubled his efforts towards their destruction, try to move parallel to the ship.

“How long until another impact, Pelle?” Bettie shouted.

“The bastard turning around has to be a minute! Wait! Half that! Fucker’s fast, Jonguh!”

“Do you have any more bright ideas?” Bettie tried to meet the gaze of her bonded partner, who had hidden her thoughts behind something distant. Bettie felt a sadness: she didn’t understand Nadeera anymore. She missed sharing that bond.

“I felt the beast’s soft belly” Nadeera responded, stoically to Bettie’s chagrin. “How would I sink the fastest?” She asked towards the crew

Bettie responded with frustration “Just tell me the plan. We’re supposed to work together. Don’t try to kill yourself unnece-

“WINDZAK!” interrupted Fransje, hunched over her wheel, bruised from landing on it and counter steering during the aggressive tilting. “Pepijn! windzak, NU!”

Pepijn tossed a canvas bag from the mast. Fransje shouted instructions, “Untie the knot with the hole away from you, Woesj!” She motioned playfully with her splintered hands. Nadeera normally would’ve laughed without the mask. “It was fun seeing you fly through the sky, mop,” Fransje grinned. “Make sure we see that again.”

Nadeera steadied her harpoon on the starboard side of the ship, readying herself with the bag in her mouth.

“Let me do it,” Bettie protested, blocking her path. “You

— you couldn't, what are you doing?" Bettie tried her usual authority, but it was threadbare.

"If you want to do something," Nadeera said with a voice sharpened by bravado, "how about you pull me out when I'm done? You're now the only one on this ship who can dive down." Words hung between them. Both women adjusted the masks of confidence they wore, for each other's sake.

"I still got enough blue blood in me for one more thrust in the fleshy bits," Nadeera tried to move the stale words floating around.

Bettie's mask slipped again. Nadeera noticed through her pain and desperation that Bettie had shown more emotion in the last five minutes than in the previous two years of their apprenticeship together. A hint of dark enjoyment cracked with a chuckle through her stern exterior.

Bettie handed her the coil harpoon. "The edge is also useful for carving. Twist the bottom once it finds purchase, and you'll be swimming in guts." She smiled wickedly. Nadeera accepted what felt like her first true weapon instruction from Bettie.

Standing at the edge of the ship, airbag clutched between her teeth, harpoon in hand, barely a liter of blood left in her veins, Nadeera looked back and smiled with a facade of comfort. Then, she jumped.

The lingering empathic link reconnected the instant she hit the water. With the patient beast waiting for her.

"I've decided one of us should die knowing what the other has lost" Fort's thought pulsed into her skull.

The knokkel was fast. She had only seconds before another impact. This time, she knew it meant to kill her.

Nadeera tried to find her rhythm, but all she found were Fort's discordant emotions.

"These waters were never yours," he thundered. "You spread death. The sea includes you only because you force yourself upon her surface."

"Alright," Nadeera thought back, taunting him. "If you're trying to convince yourself your hatred is justified, it isn't working."

"And what of yours?" Fort's brain waves turned jagged. "Why would your pain birth justification?"

"Because from your corpse we will build a better world." Nadeera had the mask of a soldier still shielding her intent, but knew she had to believe the venom she spoke. "Your death will mean something. That is my reasoning. And I know you understand it."

"How miserable," Fort whispered. "The world does not need more pain. I will release you all from it."

It was what she wanted: his hatred unrelenting. But staring at his massive body now, realizing how insignificant she was, how vast his pain truly ran, there was a lost beauty underneath that thick hide of grief and desperation. Nadeera considered, Had Fort not tried communicating with his killers, not trying to beg for his life, but to make her understand?

"I am sorry," she thought. "But this act will free no one."

"Then tear me open," Fort urged. "Let my despair return to the sea."

Fort surged forward. Nadeera's composure cracked facing death. Her plan was unraveling, but it was already set in motion, Her body remembered a rhythm. She bit down on the windbag's loose knot, released it, and dove beneath Fort's belly. Before he could interpret the situation, she drove the harpoon in the one place she'd learned was soft.

She twisted the harpoon's handle with her feet. It locked

magically in place. The whale's own speed did the rest. He gutted himself.

"Your despair won't wash away," Nadeera felt the heavy surge of Fort's emotions through the bond weighing her head down. "It'll be carried by the waves and by those who remain."

"Your kind made sure that I have none left behind," Fort answered. "Who will mourn me?"

"I will." Nadeera's tears mixed with the saltwater and blood around her. Their bond diluting with the red in the ocean. "Can I ask you something, Fort?"

'Fort?' the whale echoes grew faint 'I die at least bearing a human name... Ask, then.'

"How would you have preferred to die?"

"Surrounded by my singing herd, mourning and celebrating that I lived. How any would have preferred it."

"That would have been my answer too," Nadeera stumbled. "If you'd let me, I could sing for you."

"You are not my herd. This song belongs to the sea. And you... you are a pest within it." The stars dimmed in Fort's eyes. In that moment he reached out one last time to the last living thing in his vicinity. "Do you have any other questions?"

Nadeera bubbled one more thought "Do all whales think and feel as you do?"

"Do they need to think and feel for you to offer sympathy?" Fort replied begrudgingly. "Your kind is truly... miserable."

"I guess we are." Nadeera stared at the sun from below the surface "But we're miserable together, at least."

"I leave the world my despair", Fort said. "I... hope you learn from it."

Fort the knokkelwhale died singing his own dirge that rippled across the sea. Any whale who heard it knew he had met a violent

end and found peace in it. The tones made Nadeera weep, a fading grumble with cracks between pitches. Her proximity to the volume rattled her bones, shook her organs, and created waves in her inner ear. Her body could not withstand the sheer grief of Fort's final eulogy. Nadeera passed out.

END OF CHAPTER ONE.

2

CHAPTER TWO

Swimming upside down through a gentle current, Nadeera surrendered with closed eyes to the rhythm of the ocean. Her body turned with the tide, performing an elegant pirouette as warm and cold waters collided and spiraled her upward. With arms outstretched and lungs empty, it was hopeless enough to feel no fear. The sea guided her. In the distance, mournful whale songs echoed. The current was her trained dance partner, leading her through paces alien and instinctive.

Her right hand lifted by another — her left pressed against her chest holding a hand in hers. It was confident and familiar, her mind raced with possibilities: Could it be a teacher? A student? A friend? A lover? Could it be Momat? The thought carried both longing and disbelief. Momat had never moved with such command before. Had he learned to dance in their time apart? Did the Libraiment teach movement like this? Could his legs carry her underwater?

She opened her eyes. It was not Momat.

The figure embracing her was unfamiliar. Its skin was the same shifting blackness as haunting slijk. Beneath the surface

of the skin, coils and tendrils pulsed. Where their bodies met, subtle spines glinted, but the touch brought no pain. Where her right hand should have been there was now slijk, formed into a limb. She could feel through it, a tingling sensation.

The figure stared into her with dead eyes, and mirrored every intent of her movement. She swam into something resembling a crossbody lead— and it walked confidently across. She switched to a ballroom frame, then ballet, then a fierce battle dance. Each shift shed more of the being's excess tendrils, until what remained was a perfect reflection of herself. A simulacrum carrying her smile.

Nadeera stopped dancing to interrogate her double. "What are you?" She spoke out loud, and no water filled her lungs.

"One of you," it replied with her voice.

"Are you Fort? Or maybe Fort's despair made into a construct?" Nadeera realised that if she wanted to narrow down what was happening, these were way too specific guesses.

"I do not know a Fort." the mirrored figure looked around, more confused. "Is this really happening?"

Nadeera stifled a laugh. "How would I know? But it feels real. Isn't that enough?" That would be something you'd like to hear. Nadeera thought.

"What a stupid answer," it shot back, in a tone that made her flinch. "I didn't come here to solve riddles. I just wanted to dance and not think about philosophy. Pondering is not as fun as dancing." The figure crossed their arms and pouted, this sludge is such a spoiled brat.

Nadeera was utterly blindsided by the unwillingness of the slijk to cooperate "Alright, alright, we can dance some more if you answer a riddle, I swear it's an easy one." Nadeera pulled up her other self's chin. "What do you think my name is?"

The mirror hesitated. "You're... Momat? Did you forget?" it guessed "What are you saying? Why are you being weird? Please don't tell me this is part of some experiment you're trying."

The words of familiarity struck her head with dazing arrows. The words the mirror spoke here had been said five years ago in a dream by Nadeera, a dream she had after a gala where she saw Momat after five years of his absence. He'd gone off to a prestigious university, they'd stayed in contact through writing. But after that gala she never saw him again. They spoke shortly.

Suddenly, a massive form surged passed. The whale paused and Nadeera met its eye, and a sea of stars seemed to meet hers. With its arrival it swallowed the mirror before Nadeera could further interrogate her fake self.

In older dreams, she had always been the one swallowed. This whale was known to her from the inside, but these eyes were undoubtedly the other side of starfilled skies she had seen while laying on the whale's tongue. After being regurgitated she sculpted it from clay, drawn it for stage designers, painted its cavernous mouth with theatrical care. It had become the set for her greatest performance.

This had also been the whale that swallowed her stage and on it eighty-three people. And she had survived by clawing her way out with shards of sculpted coral, hands bleeding. She did not regret killing the beast from her dreams then, and she did not regret it now the path she had set out on was righteous.

The whale that drowned her old life swam towards the surface to an island she remained on for creative isolation, she created scene partners from leaves and driftwood, made dresses from sea shells and fiber, and rehearsed songs and choreographed dances on that salt crusted island. And when her previous dream self was done practicing. Nadeera would drown herself to wake

up inspired.

Now, she rested without air underwater among whales floating vertically, their heads aimed at the surface in communion. One by one, they rose, vanishing into the blackness of slijk, a profane ritual. Nadeera wondered that if the Slijk was on the surface, then what horrors would lie below, shivers from her spine forced her to look up.

There in the procession she spotted Fort. Recognising the curvature of his back, the hard knokkel regrown she once tore off in anger, the stitched belly she gutted in mercy. His sorrowful eye opened and viewed her. In return Nadeera tried to remain unflinching. He acknowledged her efforts by closing his eyes and to open them staring at the corrupted surface – Fort swam up. “Fort! Don’t!” Nadeera screamed after him, but the beast went and dissolved into the darkness.

She was alone, she selfishly did not want Fort to leave her without company in a sea without rhythm or sound.

She held her hands up in an embrace to the nothingness, only to find something else that made her feel more alone. Her right arm had abandoned her again. No current existed for her to navigate. So she remained drifting in the in between. Eternally.

“Bettie would’ve saved me by now,” Nadeera’s mind tried talking to itself to make her feel less crazy, counterintuitively. “It feels like I’ve been underwater for weeks. Three weeks? Who said that? Show yourself!”

Her mind chased its own tail. No longer able to control motor functions, her body had shut off the possibility for her to look down.

“Stupid body,” her mind spoke. “Always doing what it wants.”

Somewhere beneath her ribs, an unknown voice stirred, but it was intimately familiar, “I can still hear you, did You think I was gone, bitch?” it murmured, “lost among your pussied plans and pathetic... uhhhhhh, pathetic.. patheticness.”

She clenched her fevered forehead, although the seas were completely empty, too many voices overwhelmed her. “How long have I been here?” Nadeera spoke aloud through bubbles.

“three days” the voice replied through her lungs “Stomach checked, guy is running empty. You cannot skip nine meals in a row, Naddie”

Every ache reminded her of absence, so if talking to herself made it hurt less, Nadeera would. “Why can’t I look down?”

A ripple of insistent sensation answered from her core. “Limbic would not allow it. buddy knew what was below. it always nose”

Her mind stiffened. “But answers are down there. I can’t just consist of questions!”

“Exactamundo”, the voice sighed with Nadeera’s intestinal tract, “and that terrifies our pal Limbic. You dive headfirst into danger to figure shit out, always putting us in as the cost.”

Nadeera felt sweat coalesce on her brow, something in there was working overtime. “How droll! If I am that careless, then what are you?” The mind challenged. “Always chasing adrenaline. Making Nadeera stupider! You know how rash she can be!”

A calm pulse against her skin responded. “someone has to save us all when your schemes fail and they fail a lot by the weigh”

“You didn’t save Righty”, Nadeera whispered. “If you’re so

infallible then why did I lose an arm?" Her mind

A hollow ring in her marrow. "you touched the slijk. you threw us off our rhythm. and now we lost a good soldier"

Her brain tightened. "So we're making excuses now? I'll also blame Nadeera then, she got us into this mess."

"Hey!" Nadeera protested "I was just trying my best to understand that situation, and now I'm in a fake place with fake voices."

"real nuff to piss you off", her joints relaxed, "I hope you learned your lesson bout trynna understand stuff, just focus on living first"

For a moment, the coven of voices hung in an infinite silence. Nadeera felt a sobering amount of gratitude for being alive after listening to her body. "Hey, thanks" she breathed finally, "for keeping our lungs filled with oxygen."

"it is why I exist," came the faint murmur. "that and other simple pleasures"

The brain entered with a half-meant apology of their own "I did not yet have time to grieve Righty. So sorry if I lashed out. I know you try to keep us in excellent condition."

A powerful heartbeat in her palm. "grief takes time I guess. but I can wait. we always get better when we stick together"

The mind swallowed hard, a headache that made Nadeera annoyed. "I... love you. I just don't want it to be transactional. You're dangerous while in control." Nadeera was unsure if her own mind was being genuine when saying 'I love you.' She found it overly dramatic, but her body seemed to appreciate it. "You sad sack of goop." To Nadeera's annoyance her body was playing hard-to-get "sea what I can do with sum oxytocin when your not the boss"

Nadeera felt like a third wheel in her own body as her mind

enjoyed the negging. "How do you know what any of these words are when you can't even spell 'some'?"

"spells aren't important as long as I know what keeps you alive." Her toes gave a pleasant tingle, Nadeera wondered how many conversations her body and mind had had behind her back. They seemed to have rapport. The conversation continued, and Nadeera remained to listen. During this whole time she never looked below. Curiosity took over. "So how do we get out of here? And can I please look down?"

"something waits below" Shivers shook her limbs, she felt them in limbs no longer present. "are You ready to look? no turnin back"

"The water is quite nice, Nadeera." Her satisfied mind pleaded "Let's stay here a while, where time is a a slow drip we can try to recuperate, maybe even think about things we've not addressed in some times."

Exactly the reason Nadeera needed to wake up, her voice steeled. "Come on girls, you know we have to"

"your the boss" A dorsal grip that had been unnoticed in this liminal time loosened from her spine, and a relief filled her. The three were suddenly one again, and with all three combined Nadeera turned downward.

There, beneath the ocean floor, was a source of sickly yellow light, something wide as a moon, at least as big as something had to be to be visible from this distance. Within the source of light was the source of slijk, with spiralling text containing thousands of lines of unreadable languages. The centre contracted and moved. As if it was aware it was observed. Nadeera thought better than to let herself be even more known. She hung passively waiting for another movement. Nadeera saw it move suddenly, and associated it with blinking.

The thing shut off and moved oceans within that instantaneous moment. A tidal force flung Nadeera through the surface of slijk and dragged the surface with itself. The scab of slijk resembled a balloon being popped from the inside out. And when its elasticity reached its breaking point. With a loud pop she rocketed into the open sky.

For a moment, the three of Nadeera hovered between the clouds. Drenched in grey, shimmering ooze. Like a rotmeeuw covered in oil.

Drowning tended to dull the sense of urgency, but falling never could. A fast approaching death was in store for Nadeera. She estimated that no matter how good her dive, this was a lethal height. And even if she survived, she would be closer to the glowing thing at the bottom of the ocean. That primal fear triggered the alchemist lab hidden in her heart and brain, flooding her being with adrenaline and blue blood.

“now thats what the fuck Im talking about.” her body jolted blue blooded electricity into her extremities “all hand on deck, feet welcome too” Her body did its best Batu impression.

Nadeera woke up by overextending all her limbs at once, shooting upright, and laughing in a sickbed beneath humming tubes and creaking pumps. Thank you, body.

END OF CHAPTER TWO.

CHAPTER THREE

A harsh hiss of sputtering tubes yanked Nadeera back down. Tubes. Pumps. Barrels and flasks. Plugged into a rattling bouquet of fluid systems with different functions — draining, feeding, measuring, maybe some extra for fun. Aches scattered across her body like a spreading fire, but the pain wasn't the worst part, pain was familiar. The worst part was the wholly new sensation of movement inside her: fluids sloshing through expanding and contracting pipes, crawling like snakes underneath her skin, entering thin and cold and exiting thick and warm.

Her body felt like one beaker in an alchemist's twisted lab. One of those accursed scientists her church going colleagues would warn her against. Speaking of mad scientist colleagues. Nadeera found the one responsible for her current predicament reading a thick book with her feet resting on a barrel marked 'Fresh Phlegm'. Amlissa, the pompman.

For someone who'd focussed most of their efforts on the brutal efficiency of amputation and estimated guesswork, this was a little too elaborate for their regular Modus Operandi.

And yet, within the tight, steely hug of the ship's pump array Amlissa had carved out something approximating comfort for Nadeera. If she ignored the headache, the leaking wounds, and the deafening machinery.

Amlissa poked her head from the thick book. Nadeera caught a glimpse of the word "Amorphysiology" on the cover. She revealed her hawk eyes by moving her thick goggles to her forehead.

Coated in blood stains, tubing, and the distinct crust of grease and sealant, Amlissa looked like she'd been mid-way through renovating the pompan quarters with a grenade. Her fire-blond mullet was slicked back with a pungent cocktail of oils, she looked comfortable in her loose fitting surgeon's coat, and oversized engineer's overalls. Her eyes had sharp corners and were almost always half closed, and she was the only one on the ship to wear make-up on duty. Even if that makeup was smeared red stains on her eyelids, and a wing to accentuate her rotmeeuw eyes.

Still, even with her predatory eyes, when she saw Nadeera conscious, her tired face broke into a real smile.

"Welcome back, rookie," she said dryly. "Sleep well?"

Nadeera grimaced, pain writhing. Cold copper tubing entered her clavicle, her left arm, her thigh, her sternum. "Not really." Nadeera considered her sleep more carefully "Or maybe yes? Is it a good sleep if you're aware you're sleeping and also convinced you'll never wake up?"

"Yikes. Stop making me jealous." Amlissa spoke in a studied cadence.

The lightness helped. Amlissa had always tried to be good at that. Nadeera had experienced Amlissa's inner world when they had empathy-bonded during an emergency hull patch, two

decks deep in the upper slijk, performing hard menial labour. And although Amlissa powered through the monotony with little jokes, through the bond Nadeera learned that she had practiced her lines, everything Amlissa said then and now had to have been rehearsed beforehand.

Nadeera admired Amlissa's ability to compartmentalise. Nadeera's emotions spilled words like unsecured cargo. Amlissa's words were neatly stowed in a mental cargo hold. Labelled and sorted.

Amlissa had stood up during Nadeera's distracted thoughts and was standing on a crate to reach a high shelf. She was the smallest member of De Jonke Rots, which meant she was about a thumb's length shorter than Nadeera. Ships made by Scheepsoorders were for taller people. Nadeera adjustment to everything being around her size was strange. For the regular people of Uzeraigne those with Blue Blood are sometimes compared to giants of myth, and buildings and facilities are custom built for their champions, so when the Blue Blood giants leave the capital they find the world in miniature. Emphasising their strength and might.

But in Scheepsoord she was below average height, on this ship was the first time she was called 'shorty' by someone who meant it. Luckily her muscular build dissuaded the lanky Scheepsoorders from calling her that regularly. Nadeera stared at all the little steps and planks Amlissa had engineered to reach all the parts of her station, engineering it with as many nooks and crannies as a space would allow.

"Eat," Amlissa ordered. "You're low on black gall and I think I drained more than just slijk. Need to start pushing some missing liquids back in."

She had grabbed a plate from a hiding spot tucked just beneath

the warm hum of the whale-soul engine on the deck above them. It was stacked with six bittertjes, deep-fried ragout balls, golden brown, nestled beside a smear of citrus remoulade, two squares of hard-tack, and cubed cheese. Amlissa discarded the plate on Nadeera's lap.

Nadeera eagerly reached for a bittertje with her missing right hand, after a moment of realisation a sting pulsed through her bicep, Nadeera played it off by trying to casually switch arms and dipped the crumbcovered sphere in the dollop of scurvy repelling sauce.

She bit through the surface and used her tongue to scoop out the inner mush, bittertjes were rich with whale fat and oil. White cubes of harsh tart popped in contrast to the savoury bouillon of butter. The boiled whale meat dissolved in her mouth, and the lemon juices cut into her parched cheeks, she chewed to crush the fried bread crumbs, releasing more hidden flavour. And with a swallow her body hummed with satisfaction.

Each ball was supposed to be a sailor's full lunch. Here lay five more of them, With no jenever to wash them down? Nadeera remembered her empty stomach telling her she missed three days worth of meals, maybe the alcohol would not be a good idea.

She ate another bittertje and reminisced about Gitta, the fiss-jef, who would never serve bittertjes without mustard or jenever unless she wanted to enact discipline. Gitta used condiments and side-dishes to communicate. No mustard? Think about what you've done, Nadeera. She grew more concerned. Was Gitta okay? Were the others okay? Batu got crushed under splintered planks with Jandrie. Four more bittertjes

Square-jawed and sturdier than most, Batu was built for battle as Bettie or herself. but Jandrie should've been here.

Someone should've been. Bettie! Bettie had still been standing, acting tough beyond her injuries. Had she made it? Three more bittertjes.

She wanted to ask Amlissa and stared into her gorgeous eyes, underneath, the bags looked carved from black granite. Not as bad as Pelle-Pepijn's wallen — He once told her that staying up too long turned your face into the visage of a whale. Eyes drifting to the side of the head with dark blue flesh surrounded. Your nose flattening from overuse. Teeth lengthening because of gravity. Nadeera appreciated good tall tales. But Batu swore by it. Used it to enforce sleep schedules like religious doctrine. Two more bittertjes.

Amlissa stared back at the wandering eyes of Nadeera, who was idly looking around the room searching for other things to occupy her thoughts while eating. Nadeera was raised not to talk with her mouth full. And was continuously swallowing her medicine. Amlissa kept looking at her incredulously, in a way admiring her patient.

Her stump was wrapped in cloth and bound in rope, a dangling monkey-fist knot swaying where fingers once flexed. Nadeera now intentionally tried to grab the plate again with her missing right hand. This time she felt the weight of the plate, the heat of the bottom. Her brain swore she held it. A nerve ending shot with pain. Her missing hand spasmed in her mind, sending its agony up into her chest. Amlissa let her patient feel this phantom pain. And consoled her through feeding.

"Please eat up" Amlissa pushed the bittertje into Nadeera's chattering maw "If you are going to have these outbursts you need to be on full supply. Else you'd go back to Dromeland, and we both don't know how long you're going to be visiting this time." One more bittertje to go.

“I know you miss your arm a lot, but even if it floated up it would have been difficult to reattach” Amlissa said, voice flat. “Righty” Nadeera responded, “Righty’s gone.” Amlissa looked at the moordnaar’s expression with pure confusion. There was only mourning in the silly words. Tears streamed down her cheeks. Amlissa instinctively searched for a beaker to preserve the liquid. But thought better of it, stashing the thought in a crate marked ‘potential experiments’.

“Bettie said she couldn’t find it, and she swam for a couple hours. Despite my advice and her opening stitches.” Amlissa said matter-of-factly “Righty was probably swallowed by the slijk.” Nadeera bawled harder. All her fault. If she hadn’t done this, if she’d just been smarter, just less of a delusional koevis chasing danger like it owed her money.

But then Nadeera felt a soft squeeze. It originated from the nothing beyond her stump. A phantom comfort of Righty. Her breath steadied. And with her nerves calmed she ate the last bittertje.

Amlissa shifted beside her and methodically rubbed her patient’s back with steady circles. Sympathy was not her first language. She usually amputated arms, she did not tend to stick around for people to grieve them. The irony wasn’t lost on either of them. They shared an awkward smile.

Amlissa reached for her notes, ready to run post-waking diagnostics. Fluid loss in barrel amount, muscular response time, but Nadeera stopped her with a sympathetic look. Just for a moment – let the data wait. Amlissa continued her awkward massaging circles.

“Can I hug you?” Nadeera asked eventually, voice low and polite, but her eyes betrayed desperation. Please?

Amlissa, brow slick with awkward sweat, looked up from some of her calibration dials. “I couldn’t stop you if I tried,” she replied flatly. “Even missing an arm and drained of liquids, you’re still double my size in muscle alone.”

She paused, squinting at Nadeera like she was a barrel that needed measuring. As the ship’s pompman, Amlissa had an uncanny knack for estimating volume and mass, and by her rough math, one barrel of Nadeera was indeed two Amlissas, stacked like a protein-rich cargo hold.

“I’ll take your inquisitive staring as a yes,” Nadeera smiled, leaning in.

She enveloped Amlissa in a hug. Amlissa knew of the data of Nadeera’s body, a killing machine forty-nine percent more capable than Bettie, who already held some records in Scheepsoord. And these readings had been in controlled environments without bursts of blue blood and adrenaline.

Amlissa remained rigid, she felt far too small in scale to provide any meaningful comfort. Her mind spun exit strategies out of Nadeera’s vice grip. If I pressurize the phlegm bag, trigger a backup leech, maybe Bettie can koevoet me loose from the frozen cable of muscles. Now pushing the thoughts into the lower decks of her brain.

Instead, she tapped Nadeera’s broad back, finding a rhythm Batu once used on a grieving crewman, which she followed up with words she parroted from her “useful phrases for human connection” cabinet.

“There, there,” she repeated. “It’ll all get better soon. Promise.”

She didn't believe in the logistics of her words. But Nadeera did not ask for empirical evidence that things would actually get better, she just melted a little. She needed to relax a whole lot more for Amlissa's planned escape. How does Batu know these things to work? Amlissa wondered

"Thanks," Nadeera untightened the hug. "I really needed that." No you don't, you need medicine.

"You are very welcome." Amlissa sighed, reinflate her lungs. "How about you repay me by not squeezing me like a damned windzak, Nadeera."

Nadeera looked down at the tubes embedded in her chest and limbs. The buckets of blue-green bile at her bedside made her nauseous.

"Well, thank you again, Amlissa. You outperformed. I already feel like I can get back to work!" Nadeera really wanted to see the others.

Amlissa raised a skeptical brow. "Really? Because you've been hogging some premium tubing I'd like installed on..." Amlissa tried to find some neutral description, she unfortunately landed on "more sizable projects."

"I'm not sizable?" Nadeera coyly said. The food was sitting well in her stomach, but the fumes in the air made her feel slightly inebriated.

"Never mind." Amlissa became even more flustered "If you're feeling ready, I'll run some diagnostics."

"Do these 'diagnostics' require the tubes to be in our out of my body?" Nadeera asked, feeling more subdermal wriggling after she reminded herself of the tubes' existence. Amlissa pointed her thumb at one of the tubes and whistled while motioning her thumb away from Nadeera's body. "Alright get these snakes out of me." Amlissa happily obliged

“Sit up. Arms —well, limbs—out. I’m detaching your couplings.” Amlissa paused “This might sting a bit.”

Nadeera obeyed. She raised her left arm. Her right stump mirrored the motion, and she felt cold tingling, fish slipping through unseen fingers. She closed her eyes and imagined her severed limb swimming amongst others like it, adrift lost hands and feet, holding each other to form islands, trying to relive the feeling of being part of something whole again. Righty was one part of a hive of digits reaching out searching for another lost family. Nadeera thought of Fort’s final song again.

CLACK.

A metal lamprey like maw withdrew flesh from her clavicle. Blue blood trailed from the punctures, crystallizing immediately around the wound in jagged coral scabs, her body created a rocky barrier to reject the metal from returning. Bubbles of yellow phlegm sizzled in the detached coupling.

“So I’m going to ask you some questions, each one is connected to a pump removed. Answer truthfully, and I’ll determine if the tube goes back in, alright?” Amlissa said grabbing a notebook determinedly. Nadeera considered using her acting maliciously to remove every tube. Instead she nodded in agreement to the terms.

“Can you remember any dreams from your period of extended rest?” Amlissa became suddenly the beacon of formality. “Yes, but only one long one.” Nadeera acknowledged, Amlissa boringly continued reading off a checklist “Did this dream come accompanied by visions of events yet to happen or have already happened?”

Is that not everything ever? Nadeera calculated, but responded with “Yeah, technically I have had this dream before, but from a different perspective. But I knew what was going to happen in

it.” Amlissa raised a hooked eyebrow. “Did you see yourself at a different age?”

“Yes, I saw a version of my younger self in a ballgown covered in black slijk being swallowed by a whale. The whale brought that version of myself to an island where she would grow old and die.” Nadeera mentioned matter-of-factly, but felt Amlissa’s eyes burn pin-prick holes of curiosity through her facade. With her veil pierced Nadeera corrected “Okay I did not see that version of me die of old age, but that’s what happened to me in the previous dreams. So I just extrapolated from previous experiences.”

Amlissa’s pen wrote these observations furiously into notes. Nadeera asked. “Are those good or bad notes?” Amlissa did not look up while responding: “I try not to make judgements like that when I’m hypothesising, but the phlegm in your body being this yellow makes a lot more sense now.” Nadeera nodded, but had no idea of the implication.

“Shall we continue?” Amlissa asked after putting her pen down, Nadeera agreed again. Bracing for another extraction, this time the tube was ripped from the main artery in the left elbow— Amlissa held up the engorged leech and squinted at the rings of triangle teeth in its mouth. “Keep your left hand moving. We have to get your blood flowing manually again.”

Nadeera smiled as she clenched and flexed, she was especially good at regulating her own blood flow, this was not the first time physicians had done these tests, but she had learned techniques that only worked on her from her fellow blue-blooded Uzeraignian soldiers. Her heart responded to the rhythm by beating harder, marching across her ribs like a military parade. The force of the beat almost caused the lamprey on her sternum to leap away.

“Are you sure those sounds are normal?” Amlissa asked. “I’ve

read about chromatic blood, and have tried to pump accordingly. But seeing your chest bulge feels like I needed to pump more.”

“I think my choleric levels are too low,” Nadeera replied, steadying her breathing. “My equilibrium is way off. But we used to train for if we were to be drained of blood by thieves. See how a Uzeraignian regulates her heart”

Putting the palm of her hand underneath her breast, Nadeera realised she never tried this one-handed. With two quick pushes against the babump of her heart, she began a slow percussive rhythm. Each squeeze against the pulsing beat her heart into submission, she slapped the bottom of her sternum, and pounded her hand against her sternum, anticipating the moves of her own heart. Bruises formed in the impacts.

The sounds of combat echoed off the pumproom walls, until suddenly with one final pump Nadeera’s chest expanded another barrel, and deflated with a noise like the deep bass of a whale’s call. Nadeera had beaten her heart into a more appropriate rhythm that at least resembled a regular heartbeat. Amlissa had her eyebrow in that sharp angle, taking notes. “Now you can tell me what that was.”

“My fathers trained their entire life to have an opportunity to fight in gladiatorial combat against the Emperor’s elite, and with the blue blood they spilled they ensured that I would have a strong heart and violent blood,” Nadeera explained through labored breaths. “I was brewed in a cauldron in a mixture of my fathers’ blood without hue, and a dose of the Emperor’s blood large enough to ensure I led a privileged life.” Nadeera hoped this would be enough of an explanation, but Amlissa’s curiosity was not yet sated.

“The body that was given to me was a solid foundation of marble, but my labor carved it into the specimen you see before

you.” Nadeera had once rehearsed this explanation to curious taverngoers, who then —if they were cute enough— would satisfy their curiosities later in the evening with a once in a lifetime experience. “And of course my fathers and tutors made sure that I was humble enough to not brag about it, and I myself had to learn to be kind enough to myself and others by not using this explosive heart.”

Nadeera wondered if her flirtatious line was a valid explanation to give to a physician. Especially after using her heart in battle not three days prior. Amlissa filed the explanation away into her mental folder marked “Potential Projects.” Her reply was clinical: “Fascinating. Further experimentation could be mutually beneficial. If you’re up to it.” Nadeera’s thoughts bounced around, Had the path of least resistance just caused me to flirt with Amlissa? Was Amlissa flirting back? Not the first time Nadeera hit on her physician.

“No further questions, I think I got my answers.” Amlissa became even harder to read despite Nadeera’s current scrutiny. “Your unbalanced levels required two pumps for blood, so I’ll need to remove the other.” Amlissa turned her attention to the tubing in Nadeera’s right thigh, twisting it gently, but some part provided unexpected friction. She frowned and twisted, and after putting a reasonable amount of effort the the click was heard. The screw tip blossomed from its brass metal base into a verdant oxidized-copper green. She examined the nozzles of the clavicle and arm ports, confused why that piece hadn’t reacted similarly.

She showed the component to Nadeera. “Explain the tip, please” she clarified and wiggled the nozzle in a manner amusing to Nadeera.

“What about it?” Nadeera playfully responded.

“Why is it green?” Amlissa’s tone betrayed irritation. “What story do you have for this?”

“Story? Wasn’t it green when you put it in me? How am I supposed to know? I was unconscious!” Nadeera did not like the accusation that it was her fault, but at the same time her blue blood did strange things to foreign materials. If this thing was yellow when it entered Nadeera imagined Then maybe the colours just mixed inside me? She chose not to share this hypothesis with the annoyed Amlissa. But would keep it as a *coupe de grace* if more accusations came her way.

“It’s supposed to be clean copper. I wouldn’t implant rusted metal in your thigh. Not while you were unconscious.”

“Maybe it rusted from my blood? Blood is wet. Wet makes rust?” Nadeera offered, proud she did not have to use the colour mixing hypothesis this early in the conversation.

“Copper doesn’t turn this green in three days. Unless you have a thigh full of seawater, so tell me your tale of how a run in with a heks cursed you with waterlogged thighs“ Amlissa made more jokes when she was not in a joking mood.

“Maybe I am cursed!” Nadeera laughed. “Or maybe it’s my gulden hip!”

“Maybe I have drop growing out of my armpits,” Amlissa grumbled, brushing past Nadeera’s confession. Her eyes narrowed, shifting gears, considering the possibility. “Is that real? Your gulden hip?”

“Yeah, after an... incident with mages from Vinjaux” Nadeera pointed to the discoloured scar which was partly reopened by the metal slot implanted in her body, “They said I’d never walk the same again, the spell apparently shatters bones from the inside out. But some priest pitched a replacement made from Gulden.” Nadeera pointed at the ankle and large toe on the same

side, two similar incision scars were made there. “The tip of my big toe is gulden, and I have a nail of gulden through my ankle joint. Apparently it ‘helps my body remember the state it once had’.”

Amlissa froze. Her mind thinking of the medical malpractice and waste of good resources implied in that statement.

“Gulden is kostbaar — People kill for a drop of it. You can’t just use it for joint surgery. The church would not allow this!”

“Well, my fathers negotiated with the church.” Nadeera said defensively “And it was your damned church that apparently suggested the operation, despite the protests of my fathers and physicians. This leg is apparently a miracle, and I am supposed to be forever grateful for their intervention.”

“Then why aren’t you satisfied with your miracle, Nadeera?” Amlissa had grown upset. She herself began unconsciously rubbing her gulden jewelry. A nose ring, helix, tragus, as if a pickpocket bumped into her and took some out of her skull. With the size of the Gulden in her skull, she began calculating how many lifetimes she would need to preserve ore to match Nadeera’s privilege. The answer was profanely upsetting.

Nadeera met her puzzled gaze. She knew Gulden was valuable, almost all the members of De Jonke Rots had gulden piercings. The priests of the Filosoviene church taught that it was a limited resource that came from divine corpses embedded in their sacred drijfland. Her parents became devotees after her surgery, suddenly they wore Gulden piercings like many sea-folk did.

Nadeera instead saw the Filosoviene church as pirates: floating tyrants hoarding magic and metal under the guise of divine right. They take their bounty from those scared of what happens if they refuse to pay. She knew Scheepsoorders were more connected to the church, almost every one she met had the

gulden jewellery pierced through their flesh. But she hadn't expected rational Amlissa of all people to buy into the dogma.

Amlissa rubbed the gulden in her tragus, a flash of comfort washed over her, she returned with follow-ups. "Do you have visions?"

Nadeera stiffened. She did not tend to talk about her inner world like this. "My mind tends to wander, yes, but I'd call it creativity."

"What about Dreams?" Amlissa continued. Her scientific eagerness returning with the scribbling of her pen towards documents.

"I have a couple recurring ones, but after the surgery most of them feel like nightmares" Nadeera admitted,

Amlissa mused further. "Your surgery did not leave any cranial piercings, right? If it's real Gulden, your body might still try to make use of it. Resulting in visions of things to come, deaths you have yet to experience. Very interesting."

"That all sounds very theoretical for a doctor, Amlissa" Nadeera had many of these conversations before "But I don't really want to learn how interesting I am to your worldview, I want these last tubes removed." She pointed down to the chains still bolted into her body.

"Oh, natuurlijk. Right away! Please swallow the spit in your mouth, and bite your tongue with your kiezen." Amlissa brushed off the offence she caused Nadeera, already compartmentalising the feeling for later during the day. "You're gonna feel some bile come back up through the throat, if you're honest you probably won't throw up."

Before Nadeera could begin to feel offended or wonder the implication of that statement the teeth were wrenched from her stomach. Amlissa grabbed a pressure powered suture gun — a

Duerghami construction tool repurposed for battle medicine—and bolted her flesh together to make manual suturing easier. Nadeera cushioned the pain by biting on her tongue. Bile bubbled up towards her mouth. Amlissa began asking questions.

“Nadeera! What is two times four?” Amlissa kept performing her precision task.

“Eight, last time I checked” Nadeera felt the bile kept at bay a little.

“What is the capital city of het Brandtgeel Koninkrijk?”

“Uhm... I have to admit I only know cities of the kingdoms we were at war with.” Bile swirled down some more.

“Well at least you’re being honest. Let’s do two more questions— How many tonnen will the knokkel we caught fill up?”

Nadeera froze, she had forgotten that a hunt lead to a corpse, and that a corpse needed to be harvested, and that the work waited for her.

“I’m thinking about 70 tonnes of smeer, around 30 tonnes of meat, and with the magic Fort was casting, maybe 5 tonnes of traan.” Bile crept further and further away, yet Nadeera felt sick describing Fort this way.

Amlissa finished the surturing with a steady knot. “Ask Silbrand to put some magic in this one,” Amlissa started washing her hands with a bar of whale oil soap, rinsing her hands with water from an ocean pump. “so how are we feeling?”

“I feel fine, truly alive in fact” Bile bubbled up from Nadeera’s stomach, she adjusted her truth accordingly “Just trying to get through these questions so I can leave this bed.” The bile still did not settle, it wanted more from Nadeera, who in turn experimented with the bile’s reactions:

“But other than that no complaints! I feel like my body is now

brand new.” Acid touched her tongue as she spewed another lie. Nadeera did not know her body to react like this. “Alright, alright!” She responded trying not to throw up those precious bittertjes just consumed “I feel like a burden down here, it was my mistakes that hurt people, and I don’t want anyone else to help, lest they are hurt too.”

“You have quite an honest stomach, Nadeera.” Amlissa wrote down more.

After some reassurance that Nadeera was not suddenly allergic to deceit, and that her stomach would settle after a couple solid meals, they both moved on to the final tube, the one in her sternum. Amlissa climbed onto the bed, her suture pistol strapped to her side. Kneeling over Nadeera, she unlocked the coupling brass with a sequence of rotating clicks. Nadeera imagined someone walking into the precarious situation the both of them were in, and the talking to they would get from Batu.

“Steady your breath, Nadeera” Amlissa grew annoyed at Nadeera’s deep breathing disturbing the steady hands required for the decoupling “How about you take one deep breath for now? And exhale when I tell you to?” Nadeera inhaled five minutes of usable oxygen in a single breath, a moordnaar’s dose.

Amlissa unclamped the main tube. Black smoke billowed from the valve embedded. “Now exhale,” she instructed.

Those five minutes of air escaped Nadeera’s chest. With it, a thick, black cloud swirled out of her. The smoke dripped from her chest to the floor like tar. Amlissa reached for a mask to combat the fountain of carcinogens, with the mask attached she pondered, Why can’t anything be according to standard

protocol? Why won't this woman's body behave? She expected something weird to happen, just not the shape of that weirdness.

Through the smoke red eyes pierced as something ignited. Nadeera's non-existent fingers on her right-hand stump tingled, reaching for that heat. Her monkey's fist twitched and pulled, then sparked. Uncoiling and folding fingers from the tight-knit base, fingers whose tips burnt a pipe-fire orange glow. The rope pulled the stump upward and extended the will of Nadeera, who grew curious in the rope's ability to grab objects. She stared at a loose piece of piping on the bed. And the rope coiled around it, Nadeera could feel her lower arm squeeze around the object.

Nadeera focused her effort on a heavier object, still exhaling her monumental breath, and tried lifting an unattached barrel next to her bed, as the rope unfurled and coiled around the barrel she felt her bicep strain. The rope had made a connection with her musculature, and required her strength to lift the barrel. Nadeera laid the barrel gently on the floor and allowed the burning rope to reconstitute into another hand. She wondered about the length of rope that slithered in her arm and focused on a metal dish on a high platform in the far end of the pump room.

The rope-arm floated and descended. It slithered across the floor with the knot turning serpentine, and when the rope reached its logical end, Nadeera coughed out smoke and more rope was pulled from her stump, a couple arm lengths longer. Her fingers now returned to flaming coils. And wrapped around the plate.

Nadeera, still exhaling, felt joy at experiencing that hot touch. Her rope-hand returned that joy with great strength, curling and deforming the plate into the shape of a shark egg. Nadeera

tried to release her grip, but a shrill growling voice taunted in her head.

Even better than damned spik en span, hissed that voice ‘until the job is done’. Nadeera’s breath ended. Her rope fingers slackened. The former dish clattering on the floor. And both women stared at each other in a readjusting silence.

“I liked that plate,” Nadeera said mournfully. “It fed me well and looked pretty doing it”

“It was standard issue,” Amlissa lied, already calculating how many requisition forms she’d have to fill in for another.

“Any questions you still need to ask?” Nadeera tried flexing her unresponsive rope-hand. “Or does the floating rope arm negate the regular questions?”

“Well, Nadeera, everything seems fine to me, your heart is a deadly weapon, your lungs animate a rope that does your bidding” Amlissa side-eyed her. “And you have an amount of gulden in your body we could build a church from your corpse. So I’d say you are perfectly fine just the way you are.” She struck through some diagnoses with her pen, sighed and looked at Nadeera.

“How bad is it?” Nadeera said innocently. “Do I need to lay down some more?”

“I don’t know, Nadeera” Amlissa put her soapy hand through her greased hair. Slicking it back in a wet mop slapping the back of her neck. “I still need to scour these records to come to a hypothesis, and after that I might be able to diagnose things compared to Scheepsoord physiology. But I need to learn more about what is different about your body to make it make sense.”

Nadeera looked at the pumps and notes as evidence for the sleepless nights that had to have been spent here trying to keep her alive. “If there is anything I can do to help, I would love to

try. As a form of repayment.”

“Anything?” Amlissa narrowed her eyes, but the corner of her mouth twitched upward. “Try to keep your body intact, it will survive and heal itself adequately, but if you break it before I get a second opinion, you’re going to have to pay me back. With interest.” Amlissa reached out her hand.

“Deal.” Nadeera grinned as she shook it. They remained in little silence. Calculating later favors from each other, as sailors do.

END OF CHAPTER THREE.

4

CHAPTER FOUR

After cleaning up the mess and letting Amlissa list the absurd quantities of fluids that had been pumped through her, Nadeera wondered if she was now indebted to the captain for spending such an amount of resources. A barrel of yellow bile, one and a half bottles of phlegm, two bags of melancholy and half a barrel of blood in return for a currently unaccounted number of drops of her blue blood.

Nadeera practiced looping the rope in different configurations, Amlissa had suggested amputating the rope from her, but Nadeera had already grown attached to the puppet of her phantom limb. Now with the added length she had to cross the rope in ways that were practical as well as aesthetically pleasing, she crossed the rope into the folds of her well defined triceps, looping around her bicep in a triple cross pattern. With the monkey fist now strapped tightly against her deltoid like a vestigial hand. She fastened the hand with an icicle hitch knot she had forced Silbrand to teach her.

This way she could tighten and loosen the entire tapestry by pulling a loop with her left hand. Nadeera stopped her ascent

to the top deck a couple times to practice this pattern and technique. Admiring the fact she remembered this ‘useless’ knot after Silbrand’s annoyed instructions. She had bartered with him to teach her one ‘useless’ knot for every standard knot she mastered. Nadeera’s mind wandered to Silbrand’s admonishments: “Why won’t you just learn standard practice, gup, every sailor should be knowledgeable on how to tie a platte knoop or a paalsteek.”

She always responded the same: “But maybe someone’s life could only be saved by a Zoeteliefje or an ijspegel!”

“If there comes a situation where someone’s life could be saved with a decorative knot, I’ll eat my hat. And my credibility as dessert.” Silbrand was known to everyone as a curmudgeon, but no one ever called him unprofessional. Nadeera doubled down her efforts in knot practice after imagining this old man eating his crusty hat. You brought this on yourself, old man.

With her defiant vigour redoubled she reached the deck wondering how much more practice she would get in tying useless knots with a rope growing out of her arm. The sour and heavy air weighed her lungs downward with every breath. She stared at calmed water that refused to glitter. And strung above her was Fort.

His rostrum sagged onto the deck, braced by loops of salted hemp in vasthoud knots from Silbrand himself. Ribbons of tobacco ash circled the wood surrounding his massive form, a ward from Balthasar. No cuts from Gitta. No carvings from Bettie. Not a single strip of flesh offered to the guild by Fransje, to the sea by Pelle-Pepijn, to Batu for dinner. He swayed gently from the mast.

Untouched for three days. No pumps from Bettie attached, as they were all inside Nadeera apparently. The crew was

spread beneath and around Fort on the deck with heads bowed or eyes averted, their eyes fixed to cards or cups. They had seen Nadeera, but intentionally did not acknowledge her, some custom Nadeera was not informed on, she bemused.

Scanning for the carvers and their implements, a carving would normally take a crew of eight not more than ten hours, and even with Fort's considerable size, it would never take them more than three days to start. Nadeera stared at the hands of her allies, none of them bore salt on their gloves. The idle ones played, the tense ones clasped into themselves.

Batu had his usual deck of cards, but not the usual smile on his face. Nadeera sulked under glances, even those not meant for her. She found Bettie staring over the boeggeest, tracking the far horizon with predator patience. Fransje lay limp against her roerwiel, fingers twitching with boredom, idleness was torturous to her. Nadeera was not familiar enough with sailor's customs to break the silence.

The horizons laid bare thanks to the absence of the churning mist kicked up by de Jonke Rots' movement, she stared up towards het kraaiennest to try and see Pelle-Pepijn, someone she only saw in these moments of pause for the ship, as his post stuck him above the mists so he could see far, there she saw Pelle-Pepijn obviously peering down the mast at her, in a reflex of the corner of his mouth he smiled, and quickly forced his eyes to not join in.

The silence thickened. Nadeera felt it press against her skin turning into a physical thing. And to name it, would be to destroy it. She watched patiently hoping something to change. She stared at the intact door within the shattered kaptein's cabin. The less experienced crew looked at that door with fear, and Nadeera was still one of them. She tried reframing this silence

into some form of communication that she missed, what did silence mean from her superiors?

A ship actually has three helmsmen.

One of them being Fransje, the roerdraaiier. Her command bound to the wheel, exerting physical control over the wood and wind of the ship, and how hard the whale engine burned.

Batu, the ploegleider. Steered hearts from the centre of the ship, shaping a disorderly crew into a cohesive unit, managing the emotions of the fifteen members of De Jonke Rots' crew.

And Balthasar, The kaptein. Held dominion over the mythic. He spoke the deep language of the world where spirit met matter, where names held contracts. If Fransje's steering controlled the moment to moment movements of the ship, and Batu's speeches impacted the decisions of the upcoming weeks. Then Balthasar's actions set paths that would last generations. His rituals broke the world's symmetry to make way for miracles and monsters. If something strange had to take place, then Balthasar determined its duration and location.

This stasis had to be delivered by their kaptein. Batu and Fransje were laborers denied labor. Addicts denied their addiction, and their dealer had cut off the supply.

That still air carried the silence from her sagging lungs now into her knees. She stepped toward the doorframe of the kaptein's cabin, using the built up tension of awkwardness to cut towards her goal. And as her boot touched the deck with deliberate pressure, popping her air filled joints. She felt old feelings rise from her chest to her head, primal fear she felt but a couple times in her life.

Like when she was first under the gaze of Kaptein Balthasar Droogstoppel.

The memory made her freeze while looking at the kaptein's

door, every single crew member felt the weight of that threshold—the kind of weight that settled in the bone. Interrupting the vow of silence to help Nadeera would lead those that broke protocol to owe their service to De Jonke Rots in perpetuity. Or until Balthasar died. Whichever came first was up for debate.

The first action Nadeera ever witnessed from her now-kaptein had been her invitation to the crew. And she now felt that opening this door would be one of her last. Memories now filled her of her first encounter with Balthasar, her brain was giving her these thoughts to urge her to reconsider, but she remembered them to get used to that fear she then felt.

Nadeera had been fleeing the continent of Uzeraigne, seeking passage to anywhere that would have her. She had bartered with a treasure-hunting crew and paid for lodging, set to sail with them by sunrise. The ship was called De Gulden Kans—a quite literal golden opportunity. Its captain had spoken at length with her about upcoming duty, gruelling service, and her implied safety. It had been agreeable, pleasant, and utterly unremarkable.

So of course at midnight when Nadeera lay in desperate anticipation for sleep to take her, a booming knock shattered the stillness of her rented inn room. She threw on a robe and lumbered towards the still reverberating door, she had asked who it was and protested that she had to rise early to join her new crew on board De Gulden Kans.

“Miss Livegood, I came here to present to you a different type of bargain,” said a croaking voice. “A path different from the one you are now running towards. If I can just have a moment of your time.”

The bass echoed through the crooked planks of her floor, a

voice too large for the small space it filled. After the voice settled itself, the next sound was of a piece of parchment slid under the door. Nadeera recognised it as the one she'd signed that morning, but in her hands it now looked aged and yellowed. She deemed it a fake, but every iteration of her signature was exact to her specifications of the morning.

"This seems like the life you tried to sign away, Nadeera Livegood." The thing beyond the door reiterated the point with crawling timbre.

She'd wanted to ask how the voice knew her name. But considered, of course, that it was written a dozen times clearly on the document she held.

Alongside the original contract were attached a multitude of weathered pages. Performance reports, sealed letters, and a final offer stamped with the sigil of Scheepsoord, grand capital of commerce. It charted the next fifteen years of her life: above-average worker, people-pleaser, upper-management material. A single incident with pirates that this Nadeera had apparently handled with professionalism, dignity, and strict adherence to the Schatbagger Gilde protocol. It was the kind of life one built a quiet retirement on. Not a life she had ever considered. She found herself hesitating.

"There's nothing wrong with a life like that, right?" Nadeera whispered. "Strange voice behind the door... what's wrong with a stable job and a future I can live with?" Nadeera grabbed the dagger she brought for self-defence from the coatrack, realising in hindsight she should have slept with it instead. What if this thing were to enter her room while she still laid in her bed unarmed?

The stack of rings on the thing beyond the door's hand knocked once more with a ringing weight. "May I interest you

in another profession?" His voice had grown intensely soft and cordial.

She was well-versed in the art of killing, but still clutched her dagger behind her back. Moving towards the door with curiosity, which now outweighed fear. Nadeera wondered if the voice was carried by a demon, the way it kept insisting on its bargain, the way his voice filled her with shivers. She put her hand on the knob and was immediately interrupted.

"If you open this door, you invite me to cross a threshold into your life?" the voice carried strange intimacy. "Would you accommodate my presence once opened?"

Nadeera turned the knob with tepid determination, and creaked it slowly open only to find no one in the doorway. Two gemstone-green eyes hung suspended in the darkness. Gleaming with unnatural light, they revealed a volume of unnatural darkness that swallowed the faint light emitting from the lone whale oil lantern in Nadeera's room. A straight and thin cane emerged from this human shaped void, the brass filigree at the tip of the cane tapped against the floorboard just beyond the doorway. Smoke curled from underneath the plank. A fish oil scent emerged from below.

"This plank is the point of no return, for the both of us, Miss Livegood" the voice warned from within the dark. "Will you hear my list of terms and conditions? I just need a minute of your time."

The request sounded like thunder far away. Nadeera found comfort in a storm that did not hang above her, rainy nights with her father counting threes between far away lightning flashes. Now the dark omen in the inn's hallway made her feel at ease with morbid fascination.

"Am I allowed to say no to your deal?" Nadeera tried to ask

her questions in a way as not to offend demons.

“Of course, Miss Livegood, would not be a point to a deal if I forced you to take it.” The voice comforted.

“So saying point of no return was just to scare me? You have a strange way of trying to convince people.” Nadeera stared defiantly at the floating emeralds, which rotated in a way to resemble the cocking of a head.

“I am just that confident in my skills of persuasion, Miss Livegood, it additionally helps that the deal I have for you was tailor made to convince you.” It smiled. Perfect white teeth hidden in black gums. “I just need a moment of your time.”

“Alright, you’ve got me curious. But if you try anything I will defend myself” Nadeera presented the dagger behind her back to the shade, and made a motion for it to enter. The figure stepped into her room, removing a wide black hat and hanging it on the appropriate rack, and with the hat removed the shade that covered him dissipated. Beneath that cloak of shadow he looked uncannily ordinary, at least for a seven and a half foot tall gangly man.

His uniform was a patchwork collection of different naval positions, but it was immaculately clean and adorned with shining buttons. His black and grey hair curled like smoke around his freckled ears, and his impossibly green eyes stared through elongated lashes into the room. Spotting a good conversational spot, he walked past Nadeera with a gait that seemed unaccustomed to solid ground, his torso was angled around the pivot his cane and forearm made when connecting with his ribcage.

He moved deeper into the room and moved the entire bed with his thin cane, and pulled up the small chair and desk next to the bed to create the semblance of an office. He sagged through onto

the chair and angled his spindly limbs in the only way it was possible for him not to talk between his own knees. A position which could be seen as unprofessional. He gestured Nadeera to sit on the chest as a makeshift bench.

Nadeera moved to sit in a negotiating position, wanting for some reason to appear just as cordial and put together as this monster.

From across the rickety desk came the voice again, Nadeera found it strange that the low rumbling came from the mouth made up of black gums and pearly teeth that adorned this thing's face: "Let us get right into it, you seem like you value your time dearly: I am Balthasar Droogstoppel, kaptein of De Jonke Rots. And I want you, Nadeera Livegood, to become a moordnaar aboard my ship. Your talents are wasted otherwise."

"Moordnaar?" she scoffed. "You mean one of those fisher-men?"

The kaptein chuckled. "Much more than a fisherman, Miss Livegood. Moordnaars are killers of many things. But lucky for us we would seek to train you in the act of killing marine life."

She did not understand the difference and rolled her eyes. "If you are offering me a job in killing fish, I'm afraid I'll have to pass. I think I would prefer digging up lost gold and treasure to gutting sea bass. No offence"

He frowned slightly. "Offence taken, Miss Livegood. I would never waste someone like you on guppies like that. I want you to be the harbinger of death for the monsters the sea offers. How would you like to become a killer of whales?"

She paused, did Balthasar know of what happened two weeks ago? And if so, how?. "I don't think that I have it in my heart to become a killer, you have the wrong woman. I don't know why you even came to me."

Kaptein Balthasar stepped closer, pulling a crisp document from his well worn coat. The pages shimmered in the dim whale-oil lantern light, "Because you have already been indoctrinated with the experience to kill one with your bare hands. I know you have. And I know you left that moment irrevocably changed. I see the hatred you still carry towards them coiled inside."

Her heart thudded pathetically, she remembered the faces of her fellow performers, Each of them gone. She remembered staring at the audience that night and how packed it had been. Forty-eight of them swallowed with them.

"I don't hate whales, mister Droogstoppel" she exhaled in a sweet whisper. "It was just one freak incident, and a whale is just an animal, it didn't intend to cause that much destruction." Nadeera repeated the words of her father, consoling and coldly logical words after the incident. "And besides, it's dead already. So enacting revenge seems counterproductive." The words of her other father.

Balthasar lifted three fingers on one hand in an alien gesture. Then, with his remaining hand he rested his palm on top of his rightmost raised finger with four rings surrounding each phalanx. He tapped his finger against itself by recoiling it "First: I was chewed and regurgitated by the sea. My lungs are the seals on top of the deep mists. Spirits crawl daily through my cabin window. I am kaptein, not 'Mister.' Remember that. Titles matter."

She nodded, instinctively straightening her shoulders.

The second finger covered in raw scarring rose next. "Eighty-three souls were taken by one of our brothers from the sea. They shall not return. I don't know about you, but I need balance. And I think an eye for an eye could really help you process."

Nadeera felt a flush of blue shoot through, her heart already

agreed with the sentiment.

Yet her brain lingered on Momat's philosophy of peace between all life, even beyond the borders of surface and sea. A philosophy that had delivered him a death in an unsympathetic world that did not share his views. She gripped her necklace tight while remembering.

And then Balthasar raised his final point together with his third finger, covered from knuckle to nail in a black varnish, and pointed directly at her. "Your name happens to be Livegood. And as far as I am aware, in Uzeraigne, names are promises made by one's progenitors, who turned you into a chance to live—And I admit, this is speculation—to live a life they did not live. A life filled with the varied spices of life—art, love, peace, and good fortune. A good life."

She swallowed uncomfortably when facing his words and accusatory finger. Balthasar gauged his words to ring true.

"You were once on that path," Balthasar said, voice solemn. "You were upholding your promise of living good. Until a monster ripped that promise away. Now you feel you are cursed to wander as a hollow artist, with potential wasted as their baggage. So tell me..."

He gestured to the old Bagger contract.

"If you take this life of ordinariness, Miss Livegood, will you be fulfilling the promise of your name? Or will you be erasing it?"

Nadeera shook her head at her signatures. She thought of the passions she held: dance, theater, stagecraft. No mention of them ever made it into the performance reviews. These passions were never asked of a treasure hunter. Would she still dance in this life? Would she still build? Live?

"It is indeed a decent life, Nadeera," Balthasar continued, "but it is not honest to yourself. I think your heart yearns for

more, to surpass your parent's promise. They did not name you Livedecent." He pointed with three fingers at Nadeera, who traced an invisible equilateral triangle between the tips. "And if it was up to you, you would have preferred to be called Nadeera Livebest, to live the best possible life you could. So in conclusion, join me. Read the depths your name and soul carry, and then choose accordingly. I am only asking for five years on my ship, and I guarantee your harpoon will point us to a better world."

Balthasar's words rang through her skull. Nadeera thought of every promise she now carried: to live good, to love fully, to keep Momat with her, to not disappoint herself. Digging through the seabed for fifteen years felt like waiting for a better life to come to her, not living one.

She twisted her cylindrical jewellery around, feeling the chain tighten around her finger. She looked at Balthasar's still-raised middle finger, a gesture that challenged someone to violence in Uzeraignian culture. But he was challenging her to fight for herself. If he even knew the context.

Nadeera looked into his green gemstone-like eyes, and saw an uncertainty to what life his path would provide. She preferred that to the stability of the path of the baggeraar. She was boiling over with the feelings of not being capable to enact her will. This would be her first step to that independence.

"Kaptein Balthasar Droogstoppel, I accept." Nadeera proclaimed, "I will be your moordnaar until I have unburdened my soul of regret. Until I can keep the promise my fathers named me for. Or until my five years are over, whichever comes first."

"Wonderful," Balthasar thundered, laughter shaking the walls as he flicked down that final finger. He retrieved a brand-new silk smooth contract, ready to be scribbled with his jar of swirling ink.

“Please sign your name on the dotted line, Miss Livegood, and fill out sections A1 to C7. We leave tomorrow at sunrise, make sure you’re on De Jonke Rots by then.”

As Nadeera Livegood stood now, two years later, atop the salt-washed deck of De Jonke Rots, the memory swelled inside her to fill the crevasses of her brain. She turned her harpoon over in her hands, feeling its weight, a harpoon to point everyone to a better world. She moved back to the front of the ship, abandoning her journey into the captain’s quarters. Missing the green glint of her kaptein’s eyes staring at her through the keyhole.

The same green eyes watched her move across the deck, the same knowing smile underneath them. He had invited her a while ago to open a door. And to step into her real life. Yet now she was too scared to twist the knob again, Balthasar would need to spur motivation.

END OF CHAPTER FOUR

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CHAPTER FIVE

Nadeera's daydream dissolved under the weight of heavy, deliberate footsteps. Kah-tunk, Kah-tunk. She woke up from hanging lazily from the rigging beside Bettie, who sat as more of a formality than a lookout. If Nadeera hadn't been adrift in thought, she might have noticed that Bettie had been casting frequent glances her way—at the place where Nadeera's arm used to be.

The footfalls disrupted Bettie's brooding, prompting her to turn just slightly, making way as Kapitein Balthasar Droogstoppel emerged. Nadeera hoisted herself down to meet the first deliberate sounds anyone had dared to make on the ship.

There her kapitein stood, bearing familiar eyes, patchwork coat, and walking stick. Looking at Balthasar always felt like peering through a window into another world. The gravity he exuded seemed disproportionate to his frame. He never looked quite as imposing as he had the day they met. She often wondered where that presence had gone, tucked where there was no hunch in the shoulders, hidden in the nonexistent crook to the spine. He stood straight as a mast. Perhaps he hung

the scary part of him up in a coatrack in the kapitein's quarters, where no one dared to follow.

He spoke, slicing through her internal monologue:

"Welcome back to the hard wooden deck of reality, Miss Livegood. After your brief respite in a sea of uncertain dreams, I wonder: are you feeling well? Does your flesh still bleed blue? Are you still here with us?"

"Aye aye, Kapitein. To all of the above" Nadeera gave half a salute.

"Do you know what day it is?" Balthasar continued. "Do you know why we are holding our breath so long we forgot how to let it out?"

Nadeera decided to let her ignorance be masked with a clever response, she did not want to seem inattentive. "I believe it's the twenty-third day of the half-moon cycle, the year being the 872nd according to the Scheepsoord calendar. That is unless some change occurred in the recording of time itself while I lay under." She grinned. "But the reason for the silence? Nay, Kapitein, I do not know it."

She wasn't certain of the date. Not really. The last day she clearly remembered was the 20th, the day they hunted Fort. Six bittertjes since then must've made it the 23rd. It was a guess, but one sharpened by the habits of those around her.

Balthasar, unsatisfied with the answer, tilted his head disappointed.

"No, no, no, Miss Livegood." Balthasar paused. "Well, technically yes you are correct on the date, but you've been lost in blood and reverie. That beast hanging from the mizzenmast, Bettie said you named it Fort," Balthasar extended a cordial hand towards Bettie who did not reciprocate. "Fort was your fortieth kill under Moordnaar Bettie Blankendaal. That means

your trial is over. A promotion is in order! And normally the crew would wait for personal sparring in my private quarters with you emerging as the victor. Vowing to stay silent as a display of solidarity. 'Niet te vroeg gejuichd' they would have said. But it appears I have to be the one to bless the airs with your success, since the crew was about to explode in anticipation if we had to wait any longer for your wandering mind to follow through."

As if those words released a binding spell, the ship exhaled. The tension in the planks eased. The whale-soul engine that had grown cold suddenly began thrumming again with pleasant regularity. Nadeera realised how much tension lay in remaining as breathlessly silent as possible. To her time seemed to move again: the crew returned to playing cards loudly, to hanging from ropes that creaked, to slouching shoulders that had been held too stiff for too long, cracks in the air pockets between spine segments.

Kaptein Balthasar spun his hand which was still extended towards Bettie, who now stood facing Nadeera. The full extent of her injuries caught the light, burn scars trailing across the left side of her chin, climbing across the hills of her lips, crossing the aisle towards the right side of her nose, rising to her right brow. A flash of hair had been singed away from the brow to the scalp. The rawness of healing pale flesh still clung to her face. Bettie had only shown the left side of her face towards Nadeera, a superior showing unannounced scars was deemed bad luck for promotion.

From a pocket near her chest, Bettie pulled a damp parchment and unfolded it carefully, on the back was a collection of what appeared to be names and drawings of fish, Bettie continued to read aloud:

"Nadeera, as an apprentice, your head was often elsewhere.

The Dictionary should have your head next to the word impulsive, always asking strange questions to pass the time. You annoyed me for the previous forty whales.”

Biting words said without venom. Her face was unreadable, despite how well Nadeera knew Bettie’s tells. Disappointment? Sadness? Mania? Bettie’s usual suspects were absent. No clenched jaw, no raised brow, no dilated pupils. It was an expression Nadeera had to dissect for later, because if this was Bettie’s annoyed face, Nadeera need to know it instinctively.

A pause as Bettie gestured to the crew to prove her point about Nadeera’s absentmindedness. Then she continued:

“Despite this, or maybe because of it, I hereby invite you to join me as the second moordnaar of De Jonke Rots.”

Bettie smiled. Or tried to. Nadeera still couldn’t tell if it was humor, contempt, or an attempt at both.

“Really? Forty whales already?” Nadeera blinked. “I can’t believe I lost count already.” Her moordnaar’s heart thudded.

Bettie turned the parchment around. “Forty whales in almost half as many months. Above average. Understandable if you lost track. I tend not to.”

She tapped the names on the page that were next to the drawings.

“Seventeen duwgoanwhales. Twelve slagweels. Seven blauwgals. One k reel. One grijzeweel, which I did have to mark as an accident. And two knokkels.”

The parchment bore small, decently competent drawings. Bettie had sketched each individual whale. Nadeera stared at the duwgoans, tried to recount them and their names, but came up short. The duwgoans were not memorable hunts, just solid practice. Nadeera named them after non-speaking roles of her plays.

Bettie had taught her that duwgoans hunted by beaching other large seabests on salt islands. Because of their square heads they could not see exactly in front of them. If you then parked your harpoon in their blind spot and attract them with movement, they'd push themselves onto your blade. That lesson of baiting and gutting had helped her bring down Fort.

Her first slagweel still lingered in the spirals of her memory: its tusks had skewered the rowboat she was tasked to protect. Nadeera clashed with the slagweel's teeth in something resembling a knight's duel. While it was distracted Bettie had thrown a spear straight through the bugger.

Blauwgals tended to be more elusive. They bled blue like her and were found off the coasts of Uzeraigne. After a while, she stopped remembering each kill, her body got drunk on the "good stuff" hidden inside the veins of the blauwgal. Bettie had said that Nadeera left their corpses unsellable. Nadeera inflicted so much violence that the venture became unprofitable.

Her kreel was one to remember. A vicious monster-shrimp the size of a fortress. Its delicious flesh sold for absurd sums. She had only seen cuts of it before, stacked in barrels in Uzeraigne, slabs of white meat with shell still attached. The mascot of the Striker Mince & Slab company that processed kreel called it magic meat, because that company knew that if the people knew the form that their meal originated from, it would probably not have been sold as a delicacy for only the finest palates, netting less profit.

The grijzeweel was unremarkable in the hunt. It resembled a slijk-covered duwgoan. Pelle-Pepijn spotted it, Nadeera had called it incorrectly. Three routinely thrown harpoons later, it was theirs. But the carving was extraordinary.

Nadeera quickly recognised its physiology as vastly different

from a duwgoan. Its organs were misplaced. Blubber thinner. Its body filled with sacs of toxic slijk, a fact that dissuaded everyone from carving but their kaptein. In a rare display of camaraderie Balthasar himself had joined them at the carcass. He had removed five stomachs from the beast which housed strange treasures filtered from the depths beyond the slijk.

The first stomach contained a bandaged, mummified corpse, Nadeera and Balthasar recognised it as a noble from far-off Akwuhdar, it lay curled as a coiled serpent in one of the bellies of the beast. Strange flora had grown from his skin, the way green burst through the cracks of ancient statues. Now only the flattened stems and faded petals remained, pressed against his wrappings like trampled parchment. The crew, who had never glimpsed an Akwuhdarian in life, stared as though they'd unearthed a relic from myth. A ghost from a garden that never should have bloomed, according to the more superstitious sailors. Balthasar promised a proper disposal of the corpse, and moved to the next stomach.

The second sac housed silver cutlery and ceramic plates, sold by most without hesitation at the next stop. The more sentimental people kept theirs. Nadeera still ate each evening with the silver fork found in this whale's stomach. Nadeera remembered one plate matched the one she had shattered below. A flicker of regret touched her through the memory into the present. One of Amlissa's treasures she deemed 'standard issue'. Nadeera needed a real apology now.

Two stomachs filled with grey slijk were pumped into vats, stored per Balthasar's request. Two barrels nobody would see again, Amlissa had already calculated away that curiosity. The crew did not seem eager to interact with slijk then, Nadeera remembered Bettie not being enamoured by the liquid, it did

not shine as enticingly when removed from the ocean.

The final stomach was filled with jewellery and a couple silver coins that predated the foundation of Scheepsoord. The crew could not buy booze with pre-war silver, so they kept the jewellery to pawn and passed the silver to curious collectors. Nadeera wondered once more if hers was still tucked away in her quarters, or if it had slipped quietly through the floorboards, into the Amlissa's hoard.

She reminisced about that moment and imagined a path she had not taken. How did grijzeweels impact the jobs of schatbaggeraars? Did they make the job easier or harder? In a way moordnaars were only treasure-hunters wearing different clothes, coveting a different type of treasure. She had begun swirling that different path in her mind, salt maps and wreck dives, whispers of coin beneath the slijk,—

“Look what you’ve done,” a voice snapped her out of it. The entire alternate lifetime erasing itself as quickly as it swirled into her mind. “You asked her to remember something. You know how she gets with free thought. Poor lass probabs fantasizing about becoming a k reel herself”

Batu waved his hand slowly near her face. She flinched again.

Embarrassed at how much time had passed while she had been staring. The world had shifted before her glazed over eyes, Bettie now held a toolbox. Balthasar had returned to the shadows of his quarters. Apparently, he had only come to break the silence.

“Nadeera, we need you mentally present for the next part,” Batu said impatiently. Nadeera felt bad for her wandering mind. Especially after it was just now explicitly mentioned as an amicable trait.

“Attention, fellow moordnaar,” Bettie told her.

Nadeera tried to overcorrect her professionalism by standing

incredibly straight, like her military drills.

“Alright, you’re here. Let us try this again” Bettie continued and added a lilt to her voice to mock Nadeera’s perfect posture “I hereby present thou the benefits, perchance thou accepteth a humble servant such as I’s offer.”

“Aye aye, m-moordnaar,” Nadeera squawked.

Because of her current posture and sense of professionalism, Nadeera almost called Bettie “ma’am,” which would have come with another poem from Batu about shitting salt and killing your own grandfather with vergetelwier. Sailors liked their epithets. If Nadeera accepted, she would have one of her own to defend with annoying anecdotes.

“Focus,” she said to herself and incidentally to everyone within earshot.

“That’s exactly right, focus would be appreciated” Bettie replied with her wry smile and mean squint “Benefit one: you are permitted to use any tool in this box as you see fit until you get some of your own.” She presented her rusted, but ornate toolbox very informally, even if she usually handled it with care, it was the second most polished thing Bettie owned.

Oh yes, her own toolbox, Nadeera mused, imagining the curious assortment it might hold. How many peculiar implements, each designed for a single purpose, could she gather before Bettie’s patience wore thin? She pictured rows of toothy blades, curious contraptions, and small, mysterious devices tucked into their own custom leather pouches. But before her thoughts could drift any further into her personal orientation and arrangement of equipment, she forced herself to refocus, and this time, the word “Focus” remained unspoken, a command nonetheless to her scattered mind.

“Benefit two: besides tools, you will be advanced three

months forward in pay. This way, you can purchase a modest arsenal for yourself, consisting of fine weaponry.”

Nadeera was intrigued by the fact that Bettie categorized tools and weapons differently. She wanted once to bring a firearm from Uzeraigne, but tradition and superstition kept her rifles at bay. Would her other weapons be able to have decorations? Maybe she could pay someone to hex some or add charms, like the coiled harpoon of Bettie.

Focus, please, her body pleaded at her own brain. You’re gonna kill us again...

“And finally, benefit three: you receive voting power. I am hereby forsaking my throne of being the only one deciding what we slaughter. Now we must do so... uh...” She looked at Batu, who finished the sentence. “Unanimously.”

“I meant we would be down in the dirt together. What’s with all the fancy words today, eh Batu?” Bettie said with a big grin. She was in a rebellious mood, releasing a bit of pressure. All in good fun.

Batu allowed it. Nadeera wondered if Bettie had ever decided not to kill a whale that was in sight. Evidence suggested they killed every single whale they encountered, save the problematic blauwgal. Nadeera wondered if she had it in her to vote against Bettie, or if she would have done so during any of the previous forty hunts. Was there a beast she objected to killing? Not that she could think of right now. Fort maybe...

Nadeera realized she had not accepted or said anything in a while. Turning to the amused Bettie, Nadeera said, “Thank you, it’s gonna be a lot of fun to work unanimously.” beaming a cheeky smile and approaching with a hug.

Bettie, of course, refused to reciprocate or raise her hands. Not a hugger, like everyone besides Batu on the ship.

Nadeera wondered if anyone else on the ship had ever been hugged before her addition. She had occasionally tried to embrace the other crew and now considered the fact: If she was everyone's first hug, maybe that's why people had strong opinions about her. She felt a bit awkward but received an encouraging pat on the shoulder from a hand who she thought belonged to Bettie. But it was Batu tapping out for Bettie, who did not have the experience to say no to a hug.

As they exited the embrace, Bettie handed Nadeera the toolbox, turned around and left the conversation and hid in some far-off den. It had been her first hug in decades. She needed to think about some things.

"Guess I'll tell you the other responsibilities, if she's not going to" Batu said, leading her to a collection of parchment containing agreements. "I'll try to keep it light. Your responsibilities are to weigh the ship's capabilities of killing whales and the resources you would require against the lethality and profitability of the whale. After all, your decisions affect the lives of the entire crew and our revenue. Any deaths that occur during the hunt you initiated are your responsibility to recuperate financially."

This grim fact was given to Nadeera with an attempt at comforting smile combined with a look of gravitas that bore itself deep into her conscience. Batu explained that while ploegleiders would carry emotional burdens, moordnaars carried the physical burdens of the crew. Which explained to Nadeera the lavish medical treatment she received after deciding to almost drown herself during Fort's hunt. She had passed her final exam with flying colours.

Batu explained all the minutiae of each task: the acquisition of cleaning supplies, making sure the crew has sharpened blades, proper carving protocols, and her ability to issue personal requests for food and other resources. Moordnaars were effectively the commanders above everyone else during hunts. Outside of the hunt they were the cleanup crew.

“That way I can keep my job,” he joked.

He explained every detail: her modest four percent cut of the profits, and that additionally, if she were to accept, she was allowed to pick their next destination. She looked across the deck towards every one of the seas thinking of which one she would request. Staring at the annotated map Batu had tucked between the agreement papers.

At last, her racing mind settled enough to let one long-standing question surface, one that had lingered quietly behind all the others, it only took her brain a couple of hours to completely negate the existence of Fort, who hung motionless in the middle of the ship.

“What about the whale?”

“Ah! Of course. You will find the answer to that question and an official promotional document requiring your signage in Balthasar’s cabin.”

Batu frowned suddenly, features darkening with an unsettling seriousness straining the space between them. He leaned in closer shattering that space, and spoke with uncharacteristic uncertainty. “Between you and me, this request is not up to protocol, far from it. The Kaptein should not meddle with the crew’s affairs, not try to renege already agreed terms, and definitely not pause Bettie’s carving orders. But this time, he overruled everyone the moment we hoisted the body.”

He paused, swallowing hard to try and regain composure.

“Many Hells, he even pulled Gitta aside and demanded bittertjes without mustard. That’s when we all knew something was off. That’s when it stopped being just strange and started getting maligned”

Nadeera looked at Batu’s smile. Saw through his joke that this was a slightly more concerned grimace. Despite everything he knew about everyone on the ship, he was uncertain about the outcome of her meeting with Balthasar.

“Listen, Nadeera. No one is compelling you to sign anything. If you decide this path isn’t right for you, you’ll still receive full pay for labor committed, and we’ll find you a suitable island somewhere to stay a while. No hard feelings. But if you do choose to accept, I need to know beforehand it’s because you believe in it. Not out of fear of consequence, not out of obligation towards crew. Only then does your decision mean something.”

Nadeera watched Batu’s smile fade, leaving behind something closer to fear. It struck her that she had not once seen him question the Kaptein. He had always stood behind Balthasar with an unwavering steadiness, defending even the most perplexing of decisions with a calm certainty. But with this warning? His normal enthusiasm felt like the first crack in a dam. What held his loyalty so tightly bound? Was it fear of the man behind the kaptein’s desk? Or some favour yet cashed in from a past Batu was not willing to reminisce?

Balthasar came out so infrequently that there were months where nobody saw him, except Batu. He never relayed what was spoken of in the cabin. The Ploegleider carried that burden alone.

“Okay, I get it, you’re trying to freak me out so I double down, but I see through your charade, I know you’ll miss me too much if I were to leave.” Nadeera joked, seeing if Batu would revert to

his jovial self — He did not.

“I’m serious, Nadeera. He treats you differently than the rest of us. He always ends our one on ones by asking about you. He gave you priority before you were even full-fledged. Even the bittertjes, those were a special order for you. I don’t know why, and I won’t pretend to. But I’ve never seen him invest in someone like this. He sees something in you. Some sort of potential.” He let that final word hang as it coiled a knot around Nadeera’s attention.

Nadeera was now successfully unnerved, thinking mainly of the fact that she hated disappointing people who projected potential onto her. Just like her entire family did. She saw the deal she made as a method to how this sea and profession could provide for her. She had, rather foolishly, never thought about what she was giving Balthasar besides manpower and profits.

Why follow her to the inn on that particular day so long ago?

She remembered opening the stomachs of the grijzeweel and how she felt like a pirate from her stories, opening vast treasure chests. And besides all the glittering gold, Balthasar invoked his right of first share to take the mummified corpse and a single silver spoon. The crew received jewels and quite generous riches. It couldn’t be profit, Nadeera hypothesized.

She thought again about the unusual care she had received from Amlissa, orders coming directly from Balthasar. It hadn’t been typical medical care. They were doing something to her humors, manipulating her choleric levels. The word ‘potential’ settled within her, too deliberate to ignore, too vague to obsess over.

She looked to Batu with curiosity now at a high enough level that her body’s self-preservation would not distract her. And focused her gaze towards Balthasar’s door.

“Thanks for telling me, Batu. Don’t think all the effort you put into being kind to me goes without me noticing. It must be hard quite difficult, shouldering the emotions of crew, I can barely manage my own. But you should then know that I have to see what else this contract has in store.”

She flinched as Batu launched into a forceful embrace. It made sense for the ploegleider to be the hugger on the ship, Nadeera thought.

She savored this hug. It was short, vice grip, but it was nice to have it be reciprocal for once. This damned ship. It took her two years for a nice clean embrace between two huggers. Batu exited the moment holding Nadeera’s sizable shoulders and squeezed them hard, yet affectionate.

Even if it was a ploegleider’s job to use people’s bonds, emotions, and problems to his benefit, Batu at least made it seem like he truly cared. “Try to keep all your limbs this time.” He encouraged with small gestures of nervousness. Nadeera now redoubled her efforts to try and open a door.

She stared at the knocker. It stood out like an artifact misplaced, unnaturally pristine on the wear-worn ship. She had nightmares over this inconceivable cabin. The knocker showed up in most of them, it looked heavy, ornate, cold, but up close it held the presence of a serpentine idol. Had the snake always been there, coiled in her blind spot? Or had something changed in the ship’s anatomy, a new wart on the skin of the vessel? The door didn’t feel like it belonged to the ship at all. Wedged impossibly into the structure. Yet it was always present, always felt on the main deck, but invisible if you chose not to notice.

She shook the distraction out of her head and twisted the coiling knob. Choosing to now ignore the knocker.

Heavy footfalls followed her stepping inside. She heard the

heavy lock click closed behind her.

It was time for her contract negotiation.

END OF CHAPTER FIVE

CHAPTER SIX

The Kaptein's quarters were filled with a curio of oddities. Paraphernalia lay locked behind cracked glass cabinets or dangled from ropes like macabre ornaments. Pickled embryos suspended in amber jars, foreign beasts taxidermied into eternal snarls, bottles of unidentified fluids long since leaked and dried like rusted tears. And a great many bones. Most of them whale.

Nadeera recognized many of them. Decorations that looked like sea urchins or stars made from collected hind fin bone connected with rope. Balthasar apparently coveted them. Nadeera once speculated that if whales had legs, these bones would sit in their hips. She'd seen enough strung-up carcasses hanging from the masts to daydream the beasts walking on their fins, two-legged titans suspended upside down, like inverted gulls displayed at the poultry stall.

But some bones in the collection were stranger still. Not hips, but certainly whale-sized. Oddities she couldn't place. Twisting femurs that seemed impossible to place in a full skeleton, horns of cartilage jutting out in unholy directions like growths from some deep-sea coral. Nadeera had dabbled in whale anatomy

while preparing her famous play to know no whale to have this anatomy. She had carved enough cetacean viscera during day-sections to know the general architecture. These were off. Curiosities, she supposed. That was the word for them, after all.

The room itself made the outside feel alive, with the bones hanging from a central spine in the ceiling, Like a ribcage, Nadeera thought, then I must be standing in its gullet. The porthole, a singular circular eye set low near the floor, turned the quarters into a hunched cyclops. Curtains hung against windowless walls, pretending at modesty. The ceiling, with its netted ropes holding down carpet, would have made more spatial sense had she been standing on it. It all felt inverted.

In the center stood a square, dark wooden desk draped in red cloth, cluttered with scrolls, ink pots, wax seals, and stamps. Here is the tongue of her continuing metaphor. The kaptein's chair loomed behind with its back towards Nadeera, the chair stood white and ridged as a single jagged tooth of a leviathan, though Nadeera thought this part of the metaphor a bit of a stretch. No chair had been prepared for her, however. Instead, an unruly collection of mismatched seats and sitting rugs crowded the far left corner of the room like eccentric guests.

"Nadeera! Take a seat!" The voice boomed, crawling omnipresently through the wood.

Startled, she realized she had been so preoccupied with the anatomy of furniture seen Balthasar. The room had corners enough for hiding, but none wide enough to house the whole man. Still, she replied, tentatively:

"Do I just pick one? Can I keep it?" She smiled thinly, attempting levity.

"Any seat you can find is yours to sit on."

Righty spasmed confusedly a cold tremor raced through the

extension of fleshy arm. The heat and dampness of the room amplified the dissonance between phantom limb and body. no idea what to make of that her muscles responded.

An errant thought spiralled into her mind. “Me neither,”

“Me threether,” growled a voice not her own. Familiar, but unplaceable at current time.

She turned toward the pile of seats, trying to discern art from kitsch. A familiar palmwood bar stool with a straw seat she knew had the same scratch marks so you could more easily hide away cards in the reeds. From Dèsolous Dèranger, a dingy tavern in Magnarillo. The crew of De Jonke Rots had drunk there, laughed there. Batu and Fransje always regaled their storied lives on these seats and Balthasar had taken one? For meetings? To cheat at cards?

There was a bejewelled chair carved from a single block of some exotic hardwood plastered with glass gemstones, a tasseled pillow embroidered with sea serpents, a yakka-fur rug looped in brown and white spirals. A knee-high stool made of Ellyfat leather and bone, an oddity from Uzeraigne.

Her stomach churned too much symbolism for that many options. It felt like one of those riddles disguised as cognitive tests the military made her take. The one’s that determined what type of warrior she would become.

The pale glow of whale-oil lamps made her brain detach and swim in phlegm. The air was syrupy with pale, heavy smoke. And with a deep breath Nadeera chose to slip into her inner world.

There, the separation of mind and body became comforting. Righty tingled. Her chest ached thanks to her reduced cholerick levels.

“Pick a chair,” the mind instructed. “That way we know which

one not to pick.”

I don’t care, her body groaned. I’m just going to pick a place to rot.

Her mind prodded again. “Solve the riddle, I’m not interfering.”

With their remaining hand, her body began arranging the furniture into a gradient of taste: droll, tacky, derivative. An apparent instinct her physicality had kept to organize craftsmanship into a hierarchy. Her body buzzed with a stab of dopamine.

There it was. A reclining chair padded with thick whale-hair cushions. Its posture begged for a corpse. She imagined noblemen in mainland theatres, dozing through many plays, tragedy and triumph alike, too rich to be moved by human emotion.

I’ve always wanted to perish in one of these recliners, her body murmured with wistful ache. To melt into the cushions like one of those nobles, swaddled in luxury, who slept through our finest monologues. Not a single aria stirred their wine-soaked dreams while our soul bled on stage. Let us become like them, Nadi. Nothing but rest. We don’t need mind anymore where we’re going.

Nadeera considered death in the theater chair as option one. Her mind interjected. “Annoying riddle and obvious trap. Balthasar and Body are tormenting me with their simplicity.”

The mind spun theories.

“Sit on the floor like a monk. Transcend the material. Show complete and utter detachment to the concept of comfort. That will win us the game.”

Nadeera noticed, with pity, how her mind when left to its own devices, twisted into a childlike form desperate to be praised. It

had not been about the chair. Never really. It was about being the best chair-picker. About impressing the kaptein. Gold star. Top of the class. Her body, slack in the heat, sighed at the absurdity of it all. Why was her mind performing like this? Who had taught it to strive so earnestly in even the pettiest contests?

“That’s what he wants you to think I would do!” The mind snapped, its voice now dramatic, performative. “May I not perchance see my ample posterior reclining in a chair that fits my monstrous ambition? And what a chair that could be, you ask? Why, it is not the chair of the Purcor royal family, nay, it is not the Regal Brandtgeel Kruk! NAY! I say I have outwitted the vile demon Balthasar Droogstoppe! I shall sit on his chair and I shall become the kaptein! And I will perform the kaptein’s duties—yes, the right way... whatever way that may be!”

The mind spiraling, unspooling in wild, contradictory declarations. The next moment, it played the revolutionary: “No seats for me, please!” it pretended to be raised with a haughty voice newly adopted. “Do not participate in this game. It is the only way to win. My final answer is to not play at all!” Option two, apparently, was refusal. A lofty retreat from the entire tableau.

Nadeera felt pinned between two inner voices seeking grand poetic death and the other in complete denial. While her body kept sagging in the uncomfortable heat, indifferent to her opinion.

And then, through another swirl, another voice emerged.

“Unspool me,” it said. “I demand a vote,” and Nadeera felt a tug at the icicle knot near her right bicep. It was Righty speaking to her. She pulled the loop and was pleased to see that her hypothesized mechanism worked: the monkey’s fist dropped with a satisfying and smooth motion, but stopped its fall before it could slack. Instead, it hovered in the thick

air, drawing taut, pulling her forward, urging her to move. It pulled her toward an aberrant karvinje nagel. One that could not possibly ever have seen use, like those that held rope on the deck or Silbrand's chambers, but still the rest for rope was bizarrely here, in Balthasar's quarters. She marvelled that her unmoored Righty had managed such force to pull her into step toward it.

Her lungs protested with a cough—a ragged burst of clarity—and released a puff of black smoke. Without the mind's notice, Nadeera had been whispering wicked curses, animating Righty, who gave up the charade and became unspooled on the floor. Rope too tired to perform ropely duties.

“Jammer dan,” whispered the voice. “Zegt Slangeman.”

She bent down and rewound Righty tenderly, as if tucking a tired child back to bed.

Three apparent options. But none felt as if they could be right. So she chose the fourth and first option: the palmwood stool that first caught her eye. The one from Dèsolous Dèranger. It was the only one she had already experienced, a different type of comfort is what the stool would provide in this foreign room, Nadeera placed it opposite the kaptein's chair.

Your move now, Balthasar, her mind answered, desperate to continue winning a supposed game.

The chair opposite her swirled around with his voice. “You love taking your sweet-ass time, don't you?” The room grew heavier with its appearance.

Balthasar swiveled into view, as if he'd been there all along, even if Nadeera's previous observations proved otherwise. He held a pendulum-powered brass pocket watch and scribbled something in a thick and withered notebook.

“Almost exactly twelve minutes on the swing. Twelve minutes to pick a damned chair, your mind is of different stuff”

Click. A second gear on the pendulum engaged in lockstep with the first, emulation of echoing the ticking sound. Tick tick Tick tick Tick tick.

He showed no further emotion than amusement. Nothing else to betray motive. “Before we begin, is there anything you’d like to ask me?”

He smiled with crooked white teeth and black gums. That same dangerous smile accompanying sinister hidden in the question. Nadeera felt it once before. She hesitated then. The mind reminded her to caution. It had to be a trap. Another move in this game.

But confidence and curiosity always surged. The same misplaced boldness that made her choose the stool now pushed her mouth open. Batu had given her insider information, how could she not use it?

“Why the special treatment? Why focus so many resources on me? What do you have to gain?” She stumbled over the fact that she asked all her questions at once, not her best negotiating tactic.

Each question was met with a flick of the wrist and a rustle of paper, — trapped in Balthasar’s notebook, thick with pages scavenged from all corners of the world. Glossy parchment, rice-thin vellum, paper embossed with the watermarks of royal courts and crumbling anarchist manifests. He wrote her questions towards the edge of the paper and sacrilegiously continued onto the mirrored page.

The questions were also accompanied by a raised finger from his unoccupied right hand. Three fingers stood menacingly tall over Nadeera, as if her verdict was being counted aloud in the gallows yard.

The gesture mirrored that fateful moment two years ago,

when she had been asked to board the crew. Then, too, all fingers had lifted but the thumb and ring finger on his right. She wanted to ask more questions, but grew scared of the possibility of more fingers rising.

Balthasar grinned wide. The expression pulled his gaunt cheeks up, pushing his wallen —heavy, sleep-starved bags— into thick, folded ridges that threatened to swallow his eyes. And yet the smile never touched them. Eyes sharp.

He leaned forward over the desk, hand and fingers still raised, fingers splayed like a five-pointed spell.

“Let’s begin,”

“Let me answer these one at a time, for I am still but a humble bargainer, even in my ascended position of kaptein. In return for each of your questions, I have some questions the Company requires me to ask. Before we continue, these are the terms you have to agree to.”

Nadeera hadn’t realized her answers would come at a cost, but she was eager to learn more about her purpose, about Balthasar, about Het Scheepsoord, and perhaps satisfy some long-standing curiosities about spirits.

“I accept your terms,” she said. She half-expected a blood-magic contract or some other binding magic to spring into effect, but the only thing that sprang into action was Balthasar. He flicked down his attentive ink-stained finger and answered:

“Why the special treatment? Your first question. I answer thus: I find you deserving of the treatment someone of equal measure would receive, if you found them as exemplary as I find you, then the treatment would not be special at all.”

Balthasar's smile crawled to his eyes and violently pulled the emotion from his face when he continued "And I'll have you know the Company agrees with my assessment. The Board sees a bright future for you here on this ship and would enjoy applying your considerable talents in a more fitting position."

He spoke with rehearsed formality, as if a script lay before him, directing his words. Balthasar never seemed to care about his words towards the crew. Nadeera pondered his sudden burst of rabid formality.

"Satisfied?" he asked rhetorically. Snapping Nadeera out of her pondering "As for our counter question, we would love to know if you, Nadeera Livegood, in the past twenty-four months, enjoyed working with us?"

Nadeera had to believe so. There was something in this work that suited her. It felt as if her body sculpted for this very position. Her hands knew how to open sails, how to tie knots. Her muscles swelled, and she revelled in the slaughter. She hadn't been this physically strong since military school. Despite the recent loss of a limb, she had not experienced the two years as anything negative. The pain sometimes surprised her, broke the rhythm, but often her mind drifted into moments of comfort. The work was hard, but the people were kind and excellent company at the dinner table. Those were the niceties.

The mind had, however, dulled. She hadn't found a way to keep her creativity alive. No dancing, no acting, no singing. No time to remember and honour the promise to Momat. She hadn't made progress in their shared journey. "Keep me close," he had once asked. She had no will in her to do the opposite. The necklace she equated with his soul would remain on her corpse when she died. She had considered piercing it to her flesh, but settled one of her only demands to the crew: the necklace would

sink with her body.

“Continue my work. And if you can’t do it, bring it to someone who can.” That was the other half of the promise. In life, Momat had sought to understand fundamental rhythms of life—repeating patterns, accidental harmonics, rules of three, and things that did not fit neatly therein. But in the years surrounded by a crew that claimed they weren’t experts in anything outside labor, her purpose rusted. At first, sharing his work in every port, searching for someone to carry his spirit further. In time, her empathy began to rust too. She turned the mind to the consequences of the violence her body enacted on whales. In a previous life, she might have been sorrowful about the butchery she now performed daily. But whether it was her old education or this new environment, it now all felt justified.

The promise never protested in the mind. It wasn’t as if the whales would not have died without her. Bettie was a formidable moordnaar. And the resources the whales provided: schot, balein, blubber, meat, tar, traan. Had saved many more lives than she took.

Food from meat, heat burned from boiled blubber, and magic taken from repurposed traan, would not exist without these fundamental parts of the whale. Wind would not blow without the whale’s blood and a moordnaar’s sweat fueling humanity’s engines.

Her mind sheltered itself with justifications again. But in crept the consideration of the intelligence of their latest hunt, Fort. When she tried to justify or quiet her conscience, the question returned: were all her previous kills anything close to Fort?

“Do they have to be?” the last words rang in her head.

Was it because of the great warmth their blubber could contain that they had to become fuel? Because of their ancient spirits

that magic could be made from blood? If they weren't as useful, would that be enough reason to stop the killing? Was it worth draining them of flesh and guts to manage our own resources? To carve them into sellable parts?

Nadeera felt she could easily answer these questions, she was trained in the art of riposte. But asking them carried a new weight. It shocked her. Of course it didn't matter how smart they were. Killing one meant feeding the crew for two months. It meant enough traan to heat towns across the sea. She'd done the math in her early months of justifications: each barrel of traan could warm a family's meals, beds, and machines for a year. Each barrel of schot could save a hundred lives when channeled through alchemagical tools, or the arcane stitching found in the fingertips of a ripper. A blauwgal yielded about a hundred barrels. One whale meant ten thousand incantations. Ten thousand chances to ease human suffering.

Parried, and riposted. An impenetrable defence sparing her from the schism in her soul. Was she really so desperate to save lives that she would take others? Forty others? Did she feel the same about the other fish she ate? The gulls she hunted? The brain wanted the body to stop the flood of questions, questions are not for the body to ask.

Was her justification just a balancing act, to yield a net positive for the good of humanity? Or were these justifications the mind dispelling empathy?

Her internal conflict was cut short by a sound and a motion. Balthasar had smiled wider than before, his lips dragged wetly against his gums. The question he had asked was trying to bubble up through the fog of her thoughts. Shut the fuck up, body the mind demanded, and let me do my job. The question had re-emerged: her level of enjoyment in the past two years.

The mind handed the estafette stick to Nadeera, who could bullshit her way through this conversation from here.

“Of course I enjoyed it here.” A corporate smile crept on Nadeera’s face from an unknown world “The ship takes good care of me, you take good care of me, and my new sea legs enjoy the plenty visits to shore. The crew and I have grown closer, almost like a f...”

She stopped. Let’s not start throwing that word around.

“...friends. Like-a-friends.” Nadeera wondered if the people of Akwuhdar appreciated her delivery of their accent. “I feel physically the fittest I have felt in years, despite my recent injuries.” She shook the stump as emphasis “and I’m good at what I do. It’s all in all quite fulfilling.”

Something was missing from her reply, and Balthasar, had he been a worse kaptein, might have missed it. But he hadn’t.

“It feels as if there is still a thought weighing heavy on your mind. Do you wish to share your grievance with the Company?”

She noticed he stared at her expectantly.

And then she realized something else funny:

“Hey, you just asked another question. You owe me one in return!” Parry, Riposte.

Balthasar laughed genuinely. “Alright, you got me. I thought I could get away with it. I thought I could trick someone so lost in their own head. But you are surprisingly sharp, Nadeera Livegood. Deals wouldn’t be deals if they only went one way.” He raised a new finger to indicate the amount of questions Nadeera was still able to ask.

It was the first time she had a good look at his usually tucked right ring finger. She’d made mental notes of each of his fingers, which she then transcribed in notebooks, they seemed significant. This one wasn’t adorned with rings like the left,

but each phalanx was pierced with a bolt and sphere, sticking out in different directions. It looked painful. She wondered if uncurling the finger hurt. If the beads in the phalanx made a satisfying click when touching. She would be adding the ninth finger to her notebooks, another reason to return alive.

“But if you could please state your grievance, if you so desire,” Balthasar reigned Nadeera back in.

“There are doubts festering in my head about my future as a *moordnaar*.” Nadeera’s forehead was sweating trying not to ask a question in return “I wonder if I have the spirit to continue this business of butchery and bloodshed. I thought I would learn more, satisfy my curiosity. But maybe there is another way to deal with the loss I still feel.”

“All businesses are about butchery and bloodshed, Nadeera Lovegood. You are just in one of the lines of work where the blood dirties your clothes. Do not let it muddy your mind. You are not the first in this industry —*laat staan* my ship— to try and develop a conscience.”

His words stung in the way only poetic word choice had the ability to. Nadeera had, somewhat childishly, believed she had been the first. That only she and Momat had once cared about life under the sea. The slaughter was so ubiquitous, how could anyone question it? The bloodshed was profitable. Therefore, it was good for humanity.

Teenage Nadeera and Momat had of course been the only ones special enough to think outside the norm. The mind mocked Nadeera.

But why then, when she developed a play about the beauty of marine life, had she not considered what went through the minds of the people in the audience? She thought of Bettie. A *moordnaar* so curious about the bottom of the sea. About the

movement of slijk. How could someone as sweet and caring as Batu not empathize with whales?

Did everyone on the ship know the nature of the beasts they slayed? Did they still care after so many years?

Her empathy had indeed wavered in the years, but the body assured that some of it also went towards understanding the crew. Maybe the years on the ship wore you down into uncaring. She would have to ask the others. After she accepted or denied this contract, she would need to know how much of the burden of empathy she carried for the crew about the whales they all killed together.

Balthasar pulled back her wandering mind by flicking down his tattooed index finger. He was like a fisherman letting the line go slack and pulling back again.

“Your second question was: ‘Why focus these resources on me?’ The ‘me’ here refers to you, Miss Lovegood,” Balthasar said, carrying on with awkward emphasis. “Quite a simple answer: your choleric levels. Your potential to inflict violence has always been extremely high. Much too high. Your body was jumping across decks and aggressively eager to whet dull blades. And for a contract negotiation, I need you of sound body. When we are laying out these terms, we do not want to put our people in harms way.”

Nadeera hadn’t considered that her allies could see her as a threat, something as a mismanagement of her body’s fluids affected everyone’s fate. But she kept most of it under control, outbursts of blue blood magic were kept at a minimum.

“I should also inform you that your blood has been beneficial in many negotiations with spirits,” Balthasar said. This part had his familiar voice. “I have coaxed many a demon into this room with your plentiful spilled blood. The waters had rau lush

with it. But be not afraid. I have never given it to a spirit. That would not be fair to you, Nadeera.”

Nadeera’s confused mind was unsettled by this. And although she wanted to ask more, questions were expensive here.

Balthasar pulled out an unmarked glass bottle. Thick at the base, with a chip near the neck. Nadeera’s body instinctively knew her blue blood was inside, her heart echolocated the bottle with its beat.

“I am sure the mentors of Uzeraigne taught you the value of your blue blood. I, however, had never seen it before and decided to collect it these last years. Stukje bij beetje. For some future endeavour, perhaps. I am curious how you feel about my now completed collection, since you gave your most generous donation during the past few nights.”

This voice of Balthasar spoke without malice. Even if his intentions seemed anything but.

“It is odd to hear, I admit” Nadeera replied. “I knew my blood was coveted, but I was taught it became inert after leaving a warrior’s body, and only the warrior that spilt it may use it for magic. The only reason to hoard it now is to perform a ritual to create children. But the blood must be earned in battle, and only the Urchiefs of Uzeraigne know the ritual to create progeny. I think mine is too diluted to make any babies. It’s not even useful to cast worthwhile spells. So sorry to disappoint, but I don’t feel threatened by you holding my impotent blood, kaptein.”

She stopped herself from asking the obvious follow-up questions, so she understated “I still think it’s weird.” Balthasar nodded, and swirled the bottle. Resting his thumb on the cork.

“We at the compagnie believe that continuing cooperation with us would aid you in finding a personal purpose in your work, Miss Livegood. Maybe even a goal larger than yourself.

And as for your blood—according to Scheepsoord law: spilled chromatic blood on board a Gilde vessel belongs to the owner of said vessel. But we are not further interested in bottling blood.”

The harsh words sat strangely in the air, quite clinical. Balthasar had never quoted any law before. Neither had any of the other sailors during the two years she’d served aboard. But now, in this cloistered chamber heavy with whale smoke and ritual, it glinted its threatening presence, like a knife snuck into a party.

Balthasar turned the situation even stranger by sliding a black whale leather hat with accompanying buckle over his own eyes—a gesture too disjointed to be casual and began pretending to scribble notes in his mess of papers. One parchment slipped out, hovering for a moment before spiraling to the floor. Without looking down, he motioned to her to read it.

It was handwritten in her native Uzeiraighian. The ink was already dried. Balthasar pretended to continue writing.

The note offered something strange: in exchange for a few minor ‘transactions’ involving her blood, Balthasar would divulge a portion of what he called the “true purpose” behind her station aboard the ship, and what awaited her if she stayed.

This was a negotiation in her favour. But Nadeera saw it as a whisper down a dark hallway, inviting her closer to a door she hadn’t known was there. She tabled this something for later, something for outside these crooked walls.

Balthasar snapped upright and shed the hat with violent expediency, resuming his monotone. He was returning to proper form, but something about the act was flimsy now, a performance that no longer cared to mask the thing beneath. Nadeera felt the malice beneath him, though she would describe it as a presence behind Balthasar, a larger shadow he cast,

impossibly.

“For our second question in return,” Balthasar droned, “I ask of thee, Miss Lovegood: how can the Dukaten Wallenjacht Gilde improve your experience and efficiency as a future moordnaar and member of our compagnie?”

By now the fumes from the whale-oil lamps had begun to spin smoke into rings in the air, their vaporous tendrils crawling into her lungs and mind. An attempt at slowing her thoughts, she now realised, but a futile one —she used to down bowls of berserker mushroom paste when she was sixteen. She stole coveted sorcerer’s crystals from lockers and huffed them with Momat just to calm themselves down after brutal tutoring. The incense in the burners swapped her thoughts with those of her bolder self. Her thoughts were still some version of her own. And although her body was now realising she had found herself in a trap. The trapper had not realised their prey mightily aware of their predicament.

“I would like to learn more about the other roles aboard this ship,” she replied, her voice steadier than she felt. “I want to pick up some other basics. I feel I only know how to hunt and carve. I want to learn from others—to teach of my life and be taught by others. I don’t know how to cook a proper sailor’s meal. I can only tie five knots. I can’t even turn a bloody wheel correctly.”

Balthasar blinked out of sync, taken aback by the directness of her answer. He expected a selfish request for personal glory, for more kills or higher pay, not something earnest in its kindness. He pinned the response down on thick parchment and sealed it with a copper-and-bone stamp: a whirl of inlaid metals spiraling like kelp caught around one’s leg, more intricacy was in this stamp than the gaudy throne gathering dust in the corner.

She imagined herself the size of a cork, sitting on the curve of the stamp, kicking her minuscule legs. Nadeera's ego was damaged by the thought she could not hold her drugs like she used to.

Then, he slid another order across the desk, this one unsealed and apparently for Batu. Orders to adjust their daily schedules to accommodate "a period of mutual learning and skill exchange." A rebellion from Balthasar wrapped in eldritch bureaucracy. Nadeera found it touching that for once paperwork seemed to move quickly in his hands. Balthasar and the way he worked now seemed less an enigma, and more like a man and his ideals crushed and shaped by the machine he served. He castigated the system bending his spine, yet the ritual bound him and kept him sane. But something inside him still equally ached to break free.

They both sat there a moment longer than they needed to, measuring each other, eyes locked like duelists waiting for the flinch. The smoke made both of them pliable. They could see the cracks in each other—Nadeera's stubborn curiosity, Balthasar's hidden yearning. Something unnamed sparked between them then.

Balthasar broke the moment first, snapping his tattooed index finger down onto the table with ceremonial flair.

"Let us proceed with your semi-final question," he said with his other voice, "regarding 'What do you have to gain?' The 'you,' in this case, referring to us—The Compagnie." Nadeera saw in the back of his eyes that dim green, that had to be where Balthasar slumbered. The clarity of the observation dissolved under the weight of fumes. Everything that had seemed so important before now seemed submerged beneath this thick, warm sea of altered thought. She resented her past self for setting her own trap. And Balthasar, for so gleefully enforcing

the rules.

“Miss Lovegood,” he continued, his voice smoothing into something edged, “to put it simply, every entity that boards this ship is an investment. Each soul that passes through our holds breathes life into our sails or eventually joins our crew. They are all filled with possibility. The possibility to help us achieve our varied goals. And a good kaptein knows how to turn potential and possibility into cold hard reality, Balthasar happens to be a good kaptein”

He leaned forward, eyes sharp through the sunkenness. Waiting. Wanting her to ask the question about those goals, to squander her opportunity to learn anything else.

She didn’t ask anything, realising the voice had given up the pretence of coming from Balthasar. Balthasar saw something in Nadeera hesitate, and lunged himself to the front of his consciousness, vomiting the words towards her.

“Please think carefully about the question you wish to ask, Nadeera,” the actual Balthasar announced. “Do not let your fleeting curiosities cloud your judgment.”

His eyes bore into her. No swirling dark spellwork pushing them back. Just green human eyes. He saw her. And he wanted her to see him too. The eyes carried something familiar Nadeera could not yet name.

“It is now my turn to ask,” he said while swallowing his volume in sharp breaths. “But I’ve exhausted the Guild’s script. The next one... is from me. I don’t get to ask many of these.”

The smile that curled across his face then was different from before. It reached his eyes. He tapped his chin theatrically with one of his pierced fingers, letting it clink against the stud under his bottom lip, playing the fool again.

Nadeera saw through the act, but chose not to expose it. She’d

been in too many plays not to recognize a deliberate mask. Sometimes it's in your best interest to let people keep them on.

"Ah! I think I have found my question," he exclaimed and started descending his hand into his open maw, fingers plucked like a bird through grass for a worm. From his mouth, he plucked a tooth with little effort. A white molar with no blood covered in a sheen of black biofilm. He had found the question hidden at the back of his mouth.

Nadeera was reminded of another Scheepsoord superstition taught by Fransje and Pelle-Pepijn: Grey-blooded folk kept their wisdom in their molars—*de kiezen*—which in Oseanespraak also meant choices. To lose one was to lose some of your ability to make good choices. Batu joked that those without molars happened to be perfect laborers. Nadeera found the superstition comparable to one in Uzeraigne, where good ideas are stored in phlegm in the left nostril, and bad ideas in the right.

Nadeera tried to reconfirm this belief by asking the circumstantial dentist Amlissa. The pomppman had paused in her work, both hands buried in Jandrie's jaw and nodded in weary complicity. "You can gauge someone's intelligence by how many molars they still have, that's what they say," Amlissa pulled, and with it came the kies, she dryly added "Though if that's true, I've been personally lowering the competency of this ship for years."

Amlissa didn't believe the superstition. But every time she felt one crack beneath her pliers, she couldn't help but wonder about her complicity in the fable. Nadeera believed she would rather bear the pain of twelve toothaches than have her autonomy removed. So to see her kaptein Balthasar fish one out of his mouth came with an added psychological terror. What was he

planning?

“Answer the following question to my liking,” he said, his voice now full and personal, “and in return, I shall fulfill your next request. These are my final terms.”

She nodded even if she did not understand the full stakes. She wondered that if she refused if he could slot the tooth back in, pretending like nothing happened, the image concerned her vivid imagination.

He smiled genuine again, although Nadeera only recognised his smiles burying ill intent, which explains her wariness.

“If no one stood in your way,” Balthasar gestured by sliding his hands across the desk, Nadeera tried to hold the tension of the words, the fumes made it difficult for her to remember full sentences no matter how recently spoken. “if all your worries were dispelled, all your promises fulfilled, all your current needs satisfied—Where would you see yourself in twenty years?”

Not the question she’d braced for. But under the now blue haze of oil-laced smoke, the mind could let it fester for a lifetime.

Each pause between each word of each stipulation aged her. No one in her way, she was suddenly thirty. Worries dispelled, thirty-eight. Promises fulfilled, forty-two. Needs satisfied, forty-seven. In this one thought she had aged twenty years to lead her own ship. Friends surrounding her. She now drank in the fumes to live this altered life. To mine the cortisol hidden in the veins.

She saw her ship as a stage, the oceans her audience. They were hunting a company ship of Royal Cargo, though she saw herself as a liberator and a bearer of freedom. The sea was alive.

Momat was beside her. He had aged gracefully: He had aged gracefully, barely any cracks in his smooth dark skin, grey streaks in the coils of his short hair, He still wore those thick

glasses, all these years later. He found a way to stand with her on this floating stage, still shorter than her, but he held himself tall with a new confidence. His research powered the ship's heartfire. If she could have wished for anything, this was it. She was whole.

The Royal Ship aimed its cannons, but she felt her power surge. Before a single volley struck, coils of black smoke streamed from her pores. Her voice could command any object to be stopped. Her magic was mighty. Music rose, proclaiming her arrival. She leapt fifteen meters and landed in the center of the enemy vessel, untouchable.

She saw the faces of old teachers, haughty aristocrats, chiefs who had tried to claim her blood to be used for their progeny, and blowhards who demanded her deference. Those who had tried to shape her into someone she refused to become.

They struck first, of course they did. She had her emotions under control. More than that: Mind and body in perfect alignment. She could painlessly steer the urge to kill away from her murderous blood. She cast the old memories into the sea for their transgressions. Made them shed their gilded robes, their jewelry. They could either live naked in the sea, or cling to their wealth and drown. She was vengeance poetic. Her rage was honed at the circumstances and not the people. Her mind didn't try any excuses. This had to be done to achieve Momat's dreams.

This was the self she had longed to become. The icon she had promised Momat. She was free.

She hadn't indulged in such fantasies since childhood. Back then, she and Momat had wandered Uzeraigne's harbors and classrooms, witnessing injustice and dreaming of its end. She would change the world with her blue blood and vigilante fists,

he with his brilliance. Momat never let go of those dreams.

But here, in this vision's aging body, she reclaimed those childish fantasies.

With another inhale of toxic fumes, she moved another twenty years. She saw her death in a similar way before: swallowed whole by a leviathan, bones crushed, her anger and sharpened blood rendered meaningless against the unshakable beast. Her entire career of becoming a moordnaar to change this destiny seemed futile, it would eat her in the end. And although the dream often altered in details, she would sometimes be more experienced, but it only led to more scars and bruises on the beast. She never did win.

So this time at the oldest she had been in these visions, she didn't fight it. Nadeera chose to love the whale. She stroked its nostrum, kissed its hide. Still, her ribs cracked in the embrace, limbs snapped in attempting to hug. But she did not falter. She gave love through her aged body, but her mind remained steeled, with ideals unyielding. She withheld her blue blood, locked it in her chest with sheer will. Her rage would not propagate violence.

And when the beast devoured her this time, she awoke on a distant shore she had dreamed of in youth. An island all her own. She would write plays, dance, and die of age. She would rest her bones on matchingly white beaches, besides the absence of Momat. This was peace.

Yet she stirred awake. Her phantom limb tingled. Someone squeezed it gently. Fingers brushed the hairs on her missing forearm on that familiar beach. She felt the ache of a life that had been surgically cut out of her. In it, she had loved, fought, and danced.

And now she awoke in an oil-filled room to find it gone.

She wondered if Righty had washed ashore where the rest of

her body had turned to kalksteen. She couldn't recall if, in the dream, she'd had her dominant hand. She had been so free, the loss hadn't registered. That was the freedom she wanted. The freedom that one day she could forget for hours all that she had lost. She exhaled the fumes that held the last remnants of that life built in a dream.

"The life I want to live, Kaptein Balthasar," Nadeera said, voice certain, "is a life where I can be as free as I choose, as strong as I must be to protect that freedom, and whole enough to give others the same."

She gripped her necklace.

"The life we once dreamt of."

She thought of the others who had the opportunity stolen to fulfill dreams at her concert, and rage trembled in her throat. She had far to go to become that old woman who could let go of that hatred. But at least she was aware of the anger.

"That's the answer I give you. Please, judge it fairly." She had forgotten that her answer would be awarded with a tooth. Which her kaptein displayed in his open palm to her refocussing eyes.

Balthasar gave another one of those second smiles—the one Nadeera deemed real. And as quickly as the smile appeared, his demeanour shifted, his pupils swirled to the back of his skull, black tendrils dilating his eyes.

He froze. Stared past her. Something had entered the room.

He opened his mouth in a protesting yell, but the sound was caught and devoured by the heavy air. Nadeera felt some vast and cold thing crawling through the seams of the ceiling, a presence ill fitted for this tight chamber. Balthasar yelled and pointed in a soundless dispute, lips mouthing a curse meant for the intruder. She could feel the room behind her hold its breath

in response.

She tried to turn, but her body refused. A familiar voice whispered within: “Nadi, what did we learn? Eyes forward. Let Balthasar handle the thing that is not for us to know.”

The thing came to interfere, she felt the distance of the things appendages shrink closer, to see in the corner something too long to be a finger curl towards her peeking eye. But before Nadeera could feel its horrid embrace, it was cast out with violent muted cursing. Balthasar had shielded her from it, unwilling for her to see the thing. The wind that followed shook the paraphernalia and whale bone charms against each other in satisfying clinking sounds, Nadeera was glad she listened to her body’s protest.

Balthasar snapped out of his cursing stance. His voice now hoarse and hurried, with phlegm filled coughs expunging black smoke.

“Wonderful, we love it. Magnificent. You must be on board this ship, consider us most satisfied. Accept this tooth, quickly.”

He uncurled his fingers and held it between the tips, he grimaced as if in pain. In her palm, he dropped a tooth.

“To be exchanged whenever you like.”

Nadeera held the satisfyingly square tooth between her fingers. Identical for five of its sides, it was unnerving in its symmetry. Nadeera held the roots towards her for inspection. Nestled between the white pillars coiled a slick, wet tentacle, where she thought to find a nerve. The suction cups twitched. Nadeera hated looking at it, but she hypothesised the purpose of the gift: a choice she could make with kapteins authority. But she

wondered about the potential reality where she sailed De Jonke Rots as a kaptein herself. What had happened to Balthasar in that future? What had Nadeera done with her old kaptein's kies?

She breathed in fumes to help her consult the other possibilities, and in all of them she used the tooth to invoke a favour, in one life Balthasar had given her patronage and reignited her passion for theatre by having her perform for the guild masters in Scheepsoord, in another Balthasar had spent considerable time forging a curse on her harpoon, and with it Nadeera built a reputation as one of the most desired moordnaars in the guild. In yet one more he exchanged a king's ransom of gold to preserve her life after an accident.

All of these options showed Nadeera two things: First, a kaptein's kies is something powerful that could move mountains to her will and should be preserved to be used in desperate situations. Second, she did not like the feeling that she would owe any more debts to the man sitting across her. She steadied herself looking again at Balthasar, who pressed his pierced finger against his ring. His eyes glittered expectantly, spiraling with dark excitement. He felt an anticipation he had never felt in his many regenerations, a thing he had forgotten was called hope.

Nadeera looked at his desperate eyes, thinking of the thing expelled from this room that almost grabbed her neck. She recognised in his eyes something she used to see in Momat's, when he was talking about what the world expected from someone of his ilk. Both their eyes carried defiance.

Momat frequently talked about systems that oppressed, about ideas that were thought of to keep others down. Why Nadeera's childlike ideals and fists could not change the world. You can't beat the slag out of a system, because the system is designed to

create hordes of bodies to encase that violence into the flesh of unknowing masses. When Momat talked about this system, his eyes sunk to the back just like Balthasar's eyes always did. They looked like a nihilistic corpse's eyes, yet the body was still alive, the eyes were instead opaque with the death of the hope that things could get better. Nadeera was handed those eyes during her years at the academy.

But Momat never stopped believing it could get better, some days his eyes had returned to vibrant turquoise, shimmering with that childhood optimism, she recognised that shimmer when Nadeera saw Momat's eyes last. Those eyes had seen some use for his research that nobody wanted him to find, those eyes had met other glimmering eyes that exchanged and shared his ideals, those eyes that had invited Nadeera to come change the world. Those eyes that lost brightness when they met the apathy she held to his ideas. Yet those eyes still entrusted her with a promise to keep his hope alive, to stay in touch.

She stared into Balthasar's swirling green eyes and saw that promise again, that defiant attitude that things needn't be the way they are. Those eyes that glowed when Nadeera said exactly what her kaptein wanted her to.

"How can I help?" Nadeera tried to speak those words across time to that younger Momat, but they found purchase in the grinning visage of Balthasar. Who started convulsing in response, Nadeera felt that cold presence again, yet now it was emanating from her kaptein.

That sparkling green in his sockets was swallowed by expanding pupils. He rose slowly from his chair, growing to quite considerable length. Something spoke by forcing Balthasar's tongue and throat to make unwilling shapes, it did not care for the illusion that Nadeera was having a one on one conversation.

“A debt not yet repaid, bound by a pact you cannot break, Balthasar Droogstoppel. Forget not your ship is compagnie property for eighteen regenerations. The open sea your prison, De Jonke Rots your cage. Such is the will of the Guild. No employee to supersede our desire.”

Black tears streamed down his face. The voice echoed through the bones in his face finding a reverberation that rattled in Nadeera’s head. “Nadeera Lovegood, you will continue duties as promised, that tooth you are holding belongs to Balthasar, who belongs to us. Possessing it goes against compagnie policy, we shall see this snafu door de vingers if you return it to us.” Balthasar’s hand was puppeteered violently forwards, a spasm forced him to open his hand. Some great authority demanded something from her, yet she felt that spark from Balthasar before.

Nadeera held up the white kies. The entity twitched in anticipation, teeth bared in a thing resembling a smile, but the tears streamed into Balthasar’s open mouth. It was horrifying to see what power the thing held. But she did not flinch. For she was a moordenaar now, Bettie said so. Nadeera closed her hand, which baited some reaction from Balthasar, but she stared straight through the entity inhabiting him, addressing it.

“I’ve come to claim your kies’ prize, kaptein Balthasar Droogstoppel, you will teach me all the magic and hexerij you know, and many more spells that you do not. You will teach me until I am capable of breaking the compagnie’s hold over you.”

She spoke the words with gravitas, and expected lightning to shoot from her palm accompanying the moment. Yet nothing stirred. Nadeera wondered if she should have demanded something else. The entity jerked her kaptein’s head into a curious

tilt.

Balthasar inside panicked. He mimed something to Nadeera, a hand opening and closing, again and again, faster and faster. Then before Nadeera could react his body jerked unnaturally. He lunged, arm snapping violently with the sound of a whipcrack toward the kies.

Nadeera darted back. Her body moved before she could think, a side-effect of the fumes in the air. Righty screamed up her phantom limb, a searing but undecipherable message from rope gripping into her skin. Then one of the unused chairs crashed into her lower arm, filling it with splinters. The impact jarred the tooth from her grip. Clattering it across the floor.

Adrenaline rose, but no matter how hard her heart beat, her blue blood did not answer, another side-effect of the fumes. Her mind calculated the trajectory of the rapidly moving Balthasar as he leapt from his desk towards the tooth between them on the floor. Forcing her brain to manually send electricity into her legs. Which kicked Balthasar out of mid-air with enough force to send him crashing into the paraphernalia closet, shattering strange pickled corpse jars. And imbedding some of the glass into her kaptein's body.

Her mind considered that because Balthasar's body had now almost doubled in length she needed more weight behind her violence to do the damage she wanted to. His limbs had elongated so much that although the kick sent him across the room, his hands could still reach her. These were the dimensions of the body Balthasar had two years ago in that now far away cabin. His long arms came from above in a claw, she held one arm up to brace, but the thin limb barreled through it and pinned her down.

Her chest felt like it would cave inwards under the push. She

couldn't breathe, yet her rage stayed distant. So frustratingly calm. The entity didn't want her strong in this room. It had chosen to drain her violent blood. The fumes in the air had seeped away her body's control and she did not notice while sitting in her stupid chair.

Her wandering mind had to do all the predisposed actions manually: the rhythm of her breath, the contraction of her muscles, even the beat of her heart. The brain had to give out orders forcing nerves to jolt with electricity.

Her mind chose the left arm. And without control of individual muscles forced a full contraction. It snapped quickly. Jamming itself violently into the upper arm of Balthasar. Who redoubled balance and pushed harder, trying to crush Nadeera's windpipe with her own ribcage. Nadeera gasped that last breath, which had collected as many of the heavy fumes gathered on her face, since that was the new lowest point in the room.

With the new influx of vapor, time dilated. Within those precious few syrupy seconds she felt hundreds of potential lifetimes end in this room, she glimpsed at the few times she made it out of this room: one where she slew Balthasar and took command, another she saw herself collapse after a week from the injuries, mourned under grey skies. Neither seemed that interesting to her now. She narrowed down those lifetimes—this room, the next couple of seconds, me and him.

She saw thousands of outcomes in the next three seconds. Narrowing them down based on how much breath she would hold after each action she took.

A controlled jolt sent her hand to slap the tooth across the room towards a gap in the floor with a spasming palm. The puppet Balthasar jumped after it, releasing her chest, Nadeera breathed one more shallow breath of fumes, trying not to release

those in her.

Her drug addled mind sent a barrage of jolts to make Nadeera roll, and shoot both legs to extend with force, her left leg launched her up from prone, the second one arrived with a delay, causing her to spinjump a full revolution to land on the desk. A shot of dopamine arrived with pride for her glutes' ability to keep her standing. The glutes do not get enough credit for that. Another six seconds flooded her. Any direct attack without her blood would not find purchase, so Nadeera focussed all her muscles on trying to drink a bottle of her own blood.

Launch hand at bottle, how hard can that be? her mind reasoned, it jolted forward with a force that was about to shatter the glass, but luckily her mind had forgotten to close her hand. One more command and she grabbed the wine bottle, another command forced her hand to clench, contract every muscle in the hand, squeeze as hard as you can. She could hear the glass nearly shattering. She commanded the liquid to arch into her mouth. Her mind giving the command to open her mouth too late caused her to chip a tooth.

She wondered what a chipped tooth had to signify in Grijsbloed culture, a lapse of judgement? She certainly felt stupid trying to force her mouth and throat to try and chug a bottle of blood, she imagined she looked like an ellyfat calf suckling its mother's teat. She stared at the desperate entity while drinking, it was struggling to grab the kies from the floor and trying to force it back into the collection of it's current holder of teeth. As she finished the bottle she managed to get her finger to point vaguely in its direction: "Hey, I don't know what you are. But that tooth was given to me by a friend! And I was not planning on giving it back before helping him." The entity focused Balthasar's eyes onto her as they finally held the tooth. The body language was

threatening, but Balthasar's eyes screamed regret. Seeing those once glimmering eyes now faded in sadness pissed Nadeera off, and with that agitation her blood surged.

Venomous and volatile blood found the culprits in her body sedating her. Whale oil fumes prevented her blood from carrying adrenaline, her body had stiffened in contact with an ominously uncomfortable chair, and the last thing she thought would betray her were the bittertjes, so kindly given, lulling her roaring stomach into a sense of security. Her blue blood seethed back into her veins, tearing through the drugged calm with remembered violence.

Her body now on a double doped dosage. The brain sent a familiar signal to crouch down in a retreating coil to launch the body, her blue blood caused the metal supports beneath the desk to bend as she crouched. She was about to give the entity something the bittertjes only helped with: The force of her full body weight.

The mass of violently spinning limbs once known as Nadeera headed towards the gangly mass of arms and legs she had once known as Balthasar. The centrifugal force caused her blue blood to collect in her extremities. She forced that collected blood to clot, her fists swelled with magical added weight as the blood crystallized, sharp as coral and dense as iron, a spiked cudgel formed through her skin made. Within that final dancer's twist, she became the weapon, smashing the jagged mass into the back of Balthasar's head with a sound like cracking stone.

With that hit her kaptein's jaw dislocated. Skull cracked. Mismatched loose teeth spilled all over the floor. Less teeth meant ceding control, which Nadeera's mind had convinced herself had always been part of the plan. In a blink, the thing retaliated. Balthasar's body, lashed out with blind instinct. It

snatched Nadeera mid-air by one of her legs without looking, lifting her upside down like a doll gone limp, her remaining arm flailing without command, Her blood-morningstar had dissolved in a spray of blue mist, but the fire still burned behind her eyes. This had never been an honourable duel. The entity was not used to insubordination, and it had now chosen to end her for the insult.

The being stipulated beneath Balthasar's mouth "We deem your behaviour unacceptable, therefore your resignation is unfortunately under consideration. Let us discuss severance". Balthasar's right index finger cocked back with a hiss of smoke expelled from the pores of his back, the nail elongated into a cruel, jagged spear. The creature drew their hand back, trembling with the potential energy of a loaded ballista bolt, and pointed that lethal finger at her chest.

Suspended upside down like Fort did on the mast outside this little chamber, blood and smoke rushing to her head caused the futures Nadeera saw to contain a lot of imminent death. Her mind sent a corkscrew signal across her spine, clenching thighs swung her heart out of the path of the finger. Which was released with a cracking sound, created by the extension of subsequent phalanxes stretching unnaturally. Leaving a trail of smoke and stinging pain to shred through the sinew and flesh of her shoulder, all the way to the floor that now had a circular hole with no splintering.

But at least she was still alive and could try to perform a gambit, while swinging she had filled her lungs with the second hand smoke of the spear finger spell, and chose to try and demand something from the demon in her rope arm for the second time today.

"Slangeman," she ordered, "give me the damned tooth."

She released the knot using her teeth, and said the only spreuk she knew, which she believed commanded her new companion to retrieve objects.

From her knitted stump, more rope poured out of her than could ever fit. The serpent spirit guiding her monkey's fist twisted with uncannily sharp angles, ignoring every other tooth scattered on the floor to strike only for the square molar. The spirit knew that only the tooth given freely carried the power of bargaining.

With lightning speed the entity prepared by recoiling Balthasar's remaining fingers, Nadeera anticipated and swung herself while turning all the pooled blood in her head into heavy crystals, jagged spears jutted from her forehead and cheeks, she still had the wherewithal to not crystallise the blood running beneath her eyes or brain, the redistribution of weight caused Balthasar's body to ever so slightly stumble in its aim, erasing only the edge of the knot with his darting middle finger, allowing the fraying fist to snatch the molar in a tight grip.

A barrage of unspent fingers launched from Balthasar's hand, stretching impossibly long as they fired forward. Skin pulled tight to translucence, tendons drawn into hair thin lines, The nails drilled holes as they struck wood. And then the fingers whipped back just as violently, making the cost of the spell evident by the amount of unusable limp fingers hanging from the palm.

Nadeera's mind forced her to focus through the horror and pain Balthasar must be in as it caused muscle groups to grab the end of the rope attached to her and sent random jolts to violently shake the ball in unpredictable directions. Bouncing the ball end of the rope across the room, hoping the tooth was sufficiently lodged in the grip of fiber.

The entity reacted in a way that seemed annoyed, according to Nadeera's experience annoying people. It lifted her off the ground and drove her downward. Nadeera saw the future impact move towards her and twisted midair, clamping her left hand to the back of her neck. She forced her heart to reroute the blue blood in her face and skull downward. The blood crystallized along her spine in a split second, forming a rigid shell just as her body hit the wood.

The impact shattered the floor and blood-carapace, and the momentum still rattled her bones. Her vision started dimming. Whale smoke forced from her lungs, together with the futures she could see. She was slowly lifted again. And Nadeera's fading mind let the body go slack.

Slangeman reeled toward her as the entity adjusted its grip. Nadeera let her arm dangle, and tried to inconspicuously swing the rope fist across her body. After a couple of attempts of limply flailing her rope fist and her left hand together, her mind focused all its effort for the remaining hand to pinch the tooth around the molar embedded in the rope's end and palm it. Nadeera had it in her hand again.

The voice announced itself through Balthasar's throat "Your complaints have been duly noted, Miss Livegood. With that, consider your employment terminated." And raised her up to swing her into the ground once more.

Nadeera had remembered what Balthasar was miming at the start of the brawl with the opening and closing of his hand, and clenched her left hand until something cracked. She prayed it was not her wrist.

It was not.

Balthasar's body froze instantly. The entity lost its control as Nadeera laid out her terms, something greater was enforcing

this promise. Nadeera grinned through the blood and broken enamel that filled her mouth. And she spoke.

“Balthasar Droogstoppel, you and I will defeat this thing. You will teach me what the world of magic can offer: bargains, hexerij, everything. And together, we’ll free the seas of this presence, making sure it won’t ever return.”

Her words came with a gust of wind that knocked the swallowing black pupils back from Balthasar’s eyes. The grip around her ankle vanished as she fell to the ground once more, happy enough about the results to ignore the pain for a moment longer. The presence receded into some place on Balthasar’s coat, and smoke sucked into brass tubes along Balthasar’s spine. His body started shrinking as he collapsed, he pointed towards the lock of the door with one of his non limp fingers, and commanded the door to unlock.

Nadeera was still in a haze reminiscent of this fight with some sort of evil spirit, or maybe even Balthasar’s supervisor, she was happy she survived, although Her body had not yet realised it could not stand. She started to fall back, exhaustion taking her. Through her closing eyes, she saw light pour through the room. Batu and Bettie ran inside, Bettie armed with her spear in combat position. Of course they were there for them, in this room Nadeera felt separated from the rest of the world. Of course they had heard the violence.

Batu ran across the room to catch the collapsing body and saw Nadeera’s self satisfied smile and laughed with her, as if it was self-evident this amount of destruction would happen. Nadeera faded in his arms, eyes glinting with defiance.

END OF CHAPTER SIX

CHAPTER SEVEN

Nadeera stirred awake on the weathered deck of De Jonke Rots, the sharp scent of salt and drugs filling her nostrils. She blinked against the too bright low evening light, only to find Amlissa frowning at her, already fussing with a small barrel of some pungent medicine. Her surgeon's hands were quick and efficient, though her eyes bore that familiar mix of irritation and concern. Nearby, Balthasar lay propped against the ship's rail, bandaged and pale but with his green eyes alert, surrounded by a cluster of curious skippers. These men rarely witnessed their captain injured, even aboard their modest vessel.

Balthasar seemed far less battered than Nadeera had expected. She was aiming to strike the thing that was puppeteering him, but was scared with how much strain Balthasar had to endure from her attacks. He smiled at her inspecting eyes with almost all his teeth—bar one—returned to his rotted gums. Nadeera would ask about this some other time, just happy to see him conscious.

Only they knew how narrowly Nadeera had brushed death, by either delivering it to her kaptein or receiving it herself.

Balthasar had already spun a tale to the crew, claiming that he had to postpone a meeting with a sea spirit to schedule Nadeera's performance review until it had attacked them in a jealous rage. A scheduling issue was the most rational explanation of the violence they exchanged.

According to his version, the two of them had fought the creature off together. Nadeera found herself pleased by the rumor and its embellishments, for now, she chose not to contradict it until she learned more about the true nature of what happened in the quarters.

Battles with spirits usually lead to dismemberment or death, leading curious sailors to inspect the damage. With a chunk of her shoulder gone, her back bruised all over, she bore the alibi well across her body.

Balthasar's eyes lit up when he saw her stir, calling her a hero. Slowly, an image began to form among the crew: Nadeera, the fierce fighter who had faced the largest whale they had ever caught, now gifted with a magical rope arm and fresh from surviving another duel with a spirit. The captain's praise elevated her, and the tavern tales would no doubt grow taller in the days to come.

Flattered but uneasy, Nadeera realized she now carried something at sea that she tried to cast off, a reputation.

Amlissa finished suturing the ragged wound in her shoulder, the sharp sting of jenever poured into the wound and still tingled on Nadeera's skin. She envied the wound—the burn of the liquor was something her throat would have welcomed right now. But alas, the bottle was empty, and her neck was not limber enough to lick the remnants from her shoulder, a contortionist would have such a fun time drinking from themselves, her ever distracting mind imagined.

“You know you’ll always get my special treatment,” Amlissa said, her eyes narrowing as they fixed on Nadeera with that inspecting gaze she always carried. “But you need to stop getting hurt this much. It’s costing me valuable liquids.”

Nadeera felt offended by the idea that it had somehow been her fault, yet her body spoke differently. The countless wounds she had gathered over the years were often the result of a mind unwilling to back down, stubborn in its confrontations, no matter how unwilling the body was to bear the burden.

Her phantom limb sent a sudden stab of pain through her, making her jolt upright, her face tightening in a grimace. Amlissa paused, considering whether her words had physically hurt Nadeera—it would not have been the strangest diagnosis she did on Nadeera that week.

Nadeera received Amlissa’s concerning looks with humility “Sorry for bothering you. And thanks again for trying to take care of me,” Nadeera said softly. Amlissa attempted to ease the moment with a joke and lighter tone of voice. “I will always try to take it.” Making a grabbing gesture, plucking some unknown thing from the air.

Nadeera failed to grasp the metaphor, half because of her waking haze, half because of the sequence of words Amlissa had clumsily put together

“Take what?” Nadeera tried to remember some forgotten Scheepsoorden idiom.

“Take it! You know, care of others,” Amlissa stumbled over the words, “You said taking care, I then pretended to take it!” Amlissa horrified that her attempt at humor was capsizing pierced through that thin layer of irony “What I wanted to say is I will always take care of you. The lijdend voorwerp was you, the it. ”

Nadeera stared at her, quietly flattered by the clumsy attempt. Also with Nadeera's limited grasp on the Scheepsoordean language, she could swear Amlissa called her a suffering object. Which seemed particularly cruel for her sensibilities. "Ah, forget it," Amlissa muttered, abandoning her sinking ship of an icebreaker.

The failure made Nadeera laugh, a laugh that disturbed the stitches, a laugh she hadn't had since she woke up. Nadeera's warmth eased the tension off of Amlissa. Nadeera joked: "I see you're still working on your bedside manners." Amlissa blushed as she helped Nadeera to their feat. "Well, we can't all be as effortlessly charming as you, some of us have to put some grease of the elbow into casualness."

Nadeera had never seen such a crack in the pompman's guarded expression. Nadeera treasured these uncharacteristic moments—Batu's seriousness in moments out of his control, Bettie's tears when encountering natural beauty, Fransje's clumsy flirting at bars on shore.

As Nadeera struggled to stand, she noticed those emotions worn on the faces of Batu, Bettie, and Fransje watching her carefully, trying not to show their pride too openly. Nadeera attempted a nod of nonchalant acknowledgement, she had learned that a schipper would sooner swim across the four seas than display pride for their accomplishments, let alone the accomplishments of anybody else, still Batu broke through the silence. "Compliments from me, de sjef, and to yourself! You apparently excelled at your contract settlement. Those tend to get a little rowdy. Not many people walk the same before and after entering negotiations. Petje af!" Batu held his battered hat in one hand as he went for a very professional handshake, which Nadeera accepted, noticing it was still a little rough to

stand by herself, her legs felt like wet spun towels, on the verge of unwinding.

As Nadeera was pulled into a classically firm Batu-hug, Fransje snuck in to give her shoulder a supportive pat. “Lekker bezig, pik.” She said the word pik as if it was not an insult. Nadeera saw respect glint in Fransje’s eyes, spirits had no part in her everyday schedule, that’s what Balthasar made sure of. But the knowledge of such an encounter caused her to treat Nadeera as an equal in experience, not just in some contractual rank. Whatever violence had unfolded behind that cabin door was considered by schippers to be a binding contract.

Bettie tempered the mood with a more sobering reminder. “You might be accepted by the kaptein and crew now, but as representative of the moordnaar’s Guild I need to ensure you can carve, since killing is only one part of the job.” Bettie spoke very matter-of-fact, but Nadeera knew her well enough to know that she was having fun being in the mentor role.

“But alas, Nadeera, here we see the folly of your silly dreams. When I saw how massive Fort was, I thought I would use this exact moment to let you learn a valuable lesson. Your hubris equal in length of the carve needed to promote you. But now, with you in your current state, I’m feeling a little bit bad.”

Bettie sucked air through her teeth, her mouth had been scarred from the battle with Fort that when she breathed it folded the corner of her top lip into something resembling a smirk. Which unintentionally made the heavy news a bit lighter. “Guild law dictates that to confirm a graduating moordnaar’s skill, you have to do the first carve of your last traineeship hunt by yourself.”

Nadeera now recontextualised the caught glances Bettie threw at her stump earlier before at the prow. It was a different type

of guilt, a harsh lesson she had planned pushed too far. Bettie blamed her past self for being too cruel towards this present Nadeera. And instead of letting her fester in that feeling Nadeera responded in a way a cocky student would. "So when we were on Fort's trail, you thought to punish me by letting me carve him by myself?"

Bettie's face now grew even more guilty, yet her tone disallowed her self-pity "Did you not hear me, that was my expectation at the time." Bettie took a painful pause, she did not mean to belittle Nadeera. She simply remembered how grueling the indoctrinative carving had been for herself. "But if your current predicament won't allow you to —"

"So you had no doubt in your mind I would complete the hunt? Even on a quarry as big as Fort?" Nadeera interrupted, donning the mask of those confident brats from her school days, "Well, I'm honoured that you consider me so highly, Bettie. And I am not going to disappoint you now." Bettie looked in disbelief at her former student, who she now quickly stopped considering as such. "I promise my next promotion will coincide with a whale four times Fort's size. Let us see who learns what lesson then." Nadeera stared at the towering body of Fort, and gestured towards him with open hand.

The thought had finally fully spiralled into her head why Fort still hung suspended from the mast some four meters away, a monolith of flesh in the still sea. Thick ropes and rigging snaked around its body, crossing in elaborate "houdbare" knots. In Oseanespraak the word stems from the same root as vasthouden, and when words and fiber intertwine they turn into magic in the hands of sailors. They kept the carcass steady against the mast, and erosion of time and rot.

All in preparation for Nadeera's incoming grim work.

— — — — —
She circled Fort holding her loaned toolbox, inspecting every angle with grim looks, though not just with stares cast from the eyes of an apparently competent moordnaar. From a different vantage point she glared, combining the anatomical knowledge of butchery, with her experience as a stage builder. Looking at the skin as if it were bark needing to be shucked, with blubber as the wool that needed to be sheared for the costuming department.

The whale's belly revealed long rivulets of pale gray skin, folded over itself like wood grain. Cables of twisted flesh knotted near the center, their spirals becoming neat and parallel as they stretched toward the lower jaw. At the other end, near the tail, she counted the same number of ventral grooves, she wondered that if she started at the beast's chin, she could mark each one with a different color paint and follow it, did the grooves switch lanes?

She traced one path with a koevoet until she stopped at the deep gash in the belly—her doing, his undoing. Silbrand had crudely sewn it shut with thick surgical hechtingtouw. Considering the smell of inner decay would have driven the crew mad were they not able to do something about it, and drawn hungry rotmeeuwen from miles around. Nadeera held some long lost pride that had been trained into her at the depth of the scar. Blue blood should cut deep.

She chose to ignore the impersonal teachings and moved to peek Fort into the window of his soul, nobody appeared to be home. Suspended at shoulder height she stared into the now greyed out universe Fort had once held in his eyes, the now milky dome shape of the cornea she recognised as the mist that surrounded the world. It was the eye of a creature with the might

that could hold up that very same milky sky. Nadeera never was able to get a look at the eyes of the whales she slew while they held breath. What universe would be reflected with it's light not extinguished?

The only way Nadeera could grasp this vastness was by comparing the whale's eye to her own now inadequate anatomy. Despite the compliments her "tavern friends" gave her about her physique and prettiness of her eyes, she was just a speck against Fort.

The pupil she matched with the diameter of her thumb. She wondered what it must be like to see the world through eyes so vast. Would the world be smaller through larger eyes? Another revelation struck her: Fort's other eye lay two and a half plank lengths away, seperated by layers of flesh.

Nadeera imagined herself with another head, floating two planks behind her, staring the opposite way, processing an entirely different reality. One head could never observe the other. She was in awe of the strangeness of it all. She instinctively drew the concept in her journal, not fully grasping that it had been three years since she had last drawn anything at all.

Beyond the musings on scale, the eye seemed a tiny pock against the bulk of Fort's massive body. She gazed again at the colors of his entirety, thinking of the paints she would need to capture them, those glimmering grey ridges along his belly, always facing the slijk, Nadeera imagined the oily current reaching toward them from below to paint him, the same way the slijk had tried to change her, a sting shot through Righty at the thought.

The skin transitioned from that grey with painterly splotches to dark azure swaths on top, broken up by the existence of the knokkels. The knokkels that had been left unremoved in

battle, that shell of zout encrusting these knokkels. Each pillar stretched as long as a cannon, and continents of knokkels had been fractured into islands, islands that reminded Nadeera of hardened warts on human hands.

The knokkels looked like Fort's bones exposed to the world. Nadeera wondered if the knokkels were parasitic in the way they were so unlike the rest of the whale. Almost designed to slow whales down, the salt islands were visible from afar, counteracting their natural camouflage. Yet the armor the knokkels provided were an unmistakable boon, the direct cause of the struggle to take Fort down fairly. While the Empires had raised her to dismiss salt from knokkels as unclean, Nadeera appreciated the fact it all came from the same sea.

Nadeera appreciated Fort's anatomy for another forty minutes. The sound of her charcoal scribbling drawings in her leather-bound pages where the only sounds coming from her analysis coming from the curling pages of her notes. She would carve Fort to prove Bettie that Nadeera's wooden skull could bear stubborn fruit. And that her body could grow acclimated to work with an arm less.

"It's going to take me about four days, according to my calculations. I'm going to need around two hundred barrels, and many more crates and jars to store all of him." The ship creaked with the weight of its catch and the soft churn of the lingering sea —but in the faces of those gathered something larger stirred. Bettie gave a confirming nod, her first official acknowledgment of Nadeera as an equal *moordnaar* who could make her own autonomous decisions. Fransje let out a soft whistle and muttered a *Scheepsoord* idiom about guts. Batu clapped and held his hands wringing into themselves, squeezing to turn the soot in his palms to diamonds. He looked at Amlissa

as final confirmation, and Amlissa only gave a quiet “Very well, I’ll get started with redistributing the weight of our cargo”.

Balthasar, who had joined the group unnoticed, placed those familiar heavy steps forward. His movements stiff with unspoken pain Nadeera had caused, yet he spoke to her with reverence. Reverence Nadeera was unsure she deserved.

“For when the catch was yours, the carving is now thine as well, two hundred barrels for Miss Livegood will not be enough, she requires all the pompman’s pumps, and when morrow comes the ship shall be in your collection additionally. Consider the winds in our sails, and the horizon in the distance as well, Miss Livegood. Are there any more ribs from our backs you have not yet taken for granted?.” He said these words with such delight, Nadeera wondered if they could be anything but insincere. Balthasar stared vacantly into her eyes. “Well?”

“I’m fine for now, kaptein. But thanks for the offer.” Nadeera put her unbothered mask back on.

A moment passed. An agonising moment of uncertainty. Followed by a whistle from Batu pointing at Fransje, who raised a small glass. The crew remained unsure where she’d conjured it from and tapped it against the mast. “To Nadeera! To the wild one who lives to talk back to spirits, and carves whales one-armed!” Fransje placed the still filled shot glass in a hole meant for rigging, and walked back to her station.

A cheerful clamor followed. Gitta started passing around bottles and glasses, none of them the same make as Fransje’s. The skippers clustered and toasted to Nadeera’s future exploits, some laughing in jest, tapping the glass against the mast, and placing the drinks in the other holes, some even unspooled some knots to make room for the booze. Nadeera looked at the ritual fondly. Between all the well wishes Bettie’s toast stood out the

most.

“To Nadeera, may she keep at least two of her limbs and be into women with scars.” Bettie’s glass was considerably fuller than the others.

The light of the low sun caught in the knokkels as the evening arrived, glinting off the salt, across the surfaces of the twelve shot glasses. Nadeera spent the remaining light coming up with a plan to tackle the carving, eventually falling asleep against Fort’s flank.

From her newly claimed toolkit, she selected a flensing spade, a gutting saw, her personal long-handled knife, and a koevoet. Alongside the pumps Amlissa had offered, she believed herself adequately equipped for the monumental labor she would endure.

She had helped to flense, carve, boil and flay many in the past. But Fort was the largest she had done so far. And for all her confidence, Nadeera hesitated with more of that reluctant awe. Respectfully she considered not the corpse, but the ritual of labor it represented. How would Fort want to be dismembered? Would he prefer the knife to begin at the throat? The belly? Would he have preferred her to sing a song before making the first cut?

She found herself hesitant with the blade, Nadeera found her respect for Fort had not been analysed away. So her mind wandered.

“If I were killed, I would want the poachers to take every piece of me with honor” she mused, as she ran her fingers along the ridged belly, looking for an excuse to plunge the blade deep “If my flesh could feed, then let it feed richly, make a five-course

meal of me. Waste nothing. Not a thumbs length of tender flesh.” Nadeera slapped her bicep to prepare it for the hypothetical meal she would become.

“My body distributed across the world in many tender ways: my powerful lungs grafted into a young healing witch in need of my warrior’s stamina, my anarchic heart retrofitted into one of Amlissa’s pumps, my blue blood feeding an apprentice alchemist on the cusp of new magical discovery. My stomach a sturdy ball for games of ‘hoekbal’, my bones retooled as sharp utensils for laborers, my eyes fitted to the blind, my breath and guts retrofitted in inventions. My hair for the unconfident bald. Even my phlegm might be smoked to fuel a desperate artist’s late night muse.”

She pictured a busy market where people came to claim her pieces, each walking away with a part of her body wrapped in paper. Pieces they took home, where she would outlive the very families that claimed her. People complimented the taste of her flesh, the strength of her bone, Amlissa would be very proud of my powerful heart. They all thanked me for the life I had lived to become such wonderful things.

She understood, with this final thanks, that she would never truly know Fort’s ideas and philosophies, what songs he might have sung or what dreams he clung to as the salt took root in his bones. This would be a remembrance of his life performed through butchery. She would make of Fort’s remains a thousand monuments. Every very fold of gut and lobe of organ would be harvested, preserved, and repurposed into the lives of others. She would herald Fort into the world, piece by bloody piece. Because if it were her, she would want the same.

Nadeera raised a toast, knocked it against the mast, and placed it in the ring with the others.

Her mission started with the knokkels.

Even in death, Fort resisted through his salt-encrusted knokkels, clinging to his body with a tenacity that made her muscles scream. She wedged the koevoet under one and pressed down with her full weight, feet braced, sweat beading beneath her brow. As it gave way with a wet, grinding crack, she chuckled to herself hearing its impact on the deck.

“Imagine doing this while he was still alive. How fucking stupid would that have been.”

The mollusks that provided the base beneath the knokkels had burrowed deep, leaving fresh perforations in Fort’s hide. Too fresh. They must have continued digging during his suspension, gravity coaxing them to burrow deeper into the softest meat they could.

After the heavy thud of the first knokkel, she decided to make it less strenuous for the deck. Constructing a makeshift rig using Silbrand’s boring utilitarian knots, converting crates of cheese and barrels of dough into counterweights so she could lower each knokkel without smashing into the deck. Each knokkel that would normally be discarded thanks to market superstition was bound, rigged, and catalogued. If Fort could live with these parasites in his back. She would find meaning in them too.

Seventeen in total. Most clustered around the heart, fewest around the back. The largest surrounding the head. She stared at Fort, shorn of these jagged adornments. He looked like a dethroned monarch. After removing the third around the back, a hundred tiny bite marks across his back blood began torrenting out. Having been collected in the head thanks to Fort’s elongated suspension. Nadeera built a basin to collect the blood trailing down, which filled faster than she calculated.

Barrel by barrel, she emptied the basin with Amlissa’s pumps,

removing knokkels all the same. The crew gawked. No mo-ordnaar harvested nonchromatic whaleblood. But she insisted enough to have Batu and Fransje persuaded. Her half of the cargo hold would be reserved for her “ritual,” as Batu called it, around six hundred barrels of space. It would have to be justified to the ship’s majority stakeholder. Since more wasted space meant less profit. But with Batu and Balthasar co-signing the request, the scheepseignaar would be forced to tally the losses with little more than the ticking of an abacus.

By the first day’s end, she had already filled thirty barrels with blood. And once she managed to complete the draining, she moved to the flensing, and despite Bettie’s knife’s length and sharpness, it still struggled against the dense mantle. Nadeera took her carving towards the length of the belly to try and gain entry. During the process she determined that rivet one had switched lanes with rivet three, her suspicions confirmed.

Fort’s insides were a mixture of parasites, wounds, and preserved rot. She donned her rarely used suit and breathing mask, descending into the cathedral of organs only to come outside to note her expeditions in logbooks. Nine hours she spent emptying out Fort, charting future paths her knife would take through the flesh.

She preserved each organ in labeled barrels, brine filled jars, and heavy vats. All connected with houbare knots. Rearranging the cargo hold into something resembling intestines. Any piece she required for later cataloguing she sequestered in her quarters, which inadvertently became a simulacrum of her kaptein’s quarters.

In the late nights she sketched and hypothesised. Performing measurements by using estimates and writing poetry in the edges of her notes.

His digestive tract spanned nearly three Jonke Rotsen long. His lungs, each the size of a stagecoach, could fill a sail in one breath. Gory and disturbingly accurate drawings percolated her pages as she designed new methods of flight, rules and measurements spread across her pages as she drafted ideas for wind-driven games with inflated whale-bladders—balls the size of zeekoeien—with smaller ships built specifically to play her sport. If she ever made these ideas public, she feared a new wave of hunting might begin. She considered it best to keep most of her inventions secret for now.

The heart was the first extraction the following day.

Thick fat and calcified patches of salt covered the heart, Fort had not lead a very healthy life. Nadeera found veins thicker than her torso. She got halfway towards climbing inside the aorta. But decided against it. Instead drawing the scenario in her notes. Once not too long ago, during her performer's wanderings, she had slept in a sea-warped inn along the coast of Vinjaux, where the narrow room barely fit the breadth of her body. And she had to move the bed and lay diagonally to fit herself in the cheap cot. That memory came back as she drew herself a floor plan within Fort's heart. If she could coax the organ to beat again and take on her own blue, unruly blood. What destruction could the both of them cause?

She admired the rest of its beauty as she sawed through arteries and knotted smaller veins together.

It was also an infuriating nightmare to try and store. The heaviest and most unwieldy of her harvest. She circled it with ropes and rigging, using two kattedoppen to eventually manage lowering it through the hatch, settling it at last onto the back of the ship on a makeshift cart. There, beneath a canopy of drying

membranes and sinew, she began fashioning what might pass for a shrine, veiled by the drying curtains carved from Fort's interior.

After the half-day spent moving the heart, Nadeera recuperated energy with morbid cartography. Each organ became landmarks in a heroine's quest travelling the continent of Fortelle. A lost land built by a species many had forgotten, bipedal whales had ruled these lands, and humans were hunted for their flesh. She incorporated all her harvested guts into the story.

All that remained was the brain. Nadeera started drawing different angles of entry to minimise the damage of Fort's skull. She got inspired at dinnertime by Gitta's pickled eggs and their elasticity, she started hypothesising with Amlissa about a mix of fluids, and made some variations to be used on the uneaten fish brains for experimentation. The next dinner Gitta, Amlissa, and Nadeera sat together to discuss the results of their experiments. Finding the most effective one to be the brain soaked with three parts pure alcohol, two parts vinegar, and one part spinal fluid. The brain became extremely pliable and could be squashed and returned to its original shape greatly. Nadeera asked for Gitta and Nadeera to help her make about a barrel's worth. Nadeera continued with her planning.

She would saw a triangular hole into the back of the cranium and remove the phlegm trapped within, then she would refill the cavity with this preservative fluid for the brain to soak in, she would have to wait a couple mornings for the chemistry to do its job. Mornings in which she would be carving whale flesh and boiling it for blubber. To be sure of the amount of preservatives she drilled a hole in the back of the head from within Fort and started measuring out the amount of schot trapped in the skull.

She watched the pearlescent oil shimmer while flowing out

of the triangular hole. It moved and bubbled in curls. Not that useful for candle making, Nadeera noted, but the texture reminded her of the grey flow of slijk beneath the sea. It flowed stroop-like. If the violent slijk was as inviting to dip in as this schot, Nadeera would have lost more than her arm. She drew the ocean map corresponding with currents of this curious crawling liquid as the cause of the wrinkles' formation in Fort's brain. She imagined her own brain bathed in this fluid, what images and thoughts would spring from her mind in the spirals swirling from this sludge? If Nadeera wanted to she could submerge herself in the barrel she filled, a curious concept she saved for later.

For now she pumped a large amount of a cocktail she concocted with Amlissa and Gitta during a squeamish dinnertime, e

By the end of this second day, she had catalogued and stuffed a quarter of the hold with fifty barrels of volume with a wide array of blood, organs, and other curiosities. Her recovering hours dissolved into pages in notebooks and sketched diagrams, more and more ideas flowed from this ritual. She collapsed eventually, on top of fresh words pressed from parchment into her cheek.

* * *

The following morning, she began the arduous work of separating skin from blubber. Her bones ached from the previous days, but she did not resent past Nadeera, for that same Nadeera set out those perforated guidelines for her blade. Past Nadeera had already decided that the blubber would be majority cooked, with a small part preserved for future concepts.

Despite her exhaustion and missing appendage, she greeted

the cutting with an appreciation of the beauty in the rhythm of labour. And where there was any rhythm, there was an opportunity for a dance. But how had her endurance for dance held up on the decks of De Jonke Rots, with no partner to dance with?

Flensing with a team of fifteen was exhausting, but workers had songs and rhythms they added to make the work more bearable, let alone the ease of task division. And although Nadeera had to sing solo, she had made each cut easier and easier for her current self.

Removing all the innards and marking spots in the days before, left her with a clear map to flense from the inside out, using the ropes and hooks she'd rigged during organ extraction to peel the blubber free from within. With her diving suit still strapped to her for her inner exploration.

The first strip took over an hour to cut and boil. A lower arm's length wide ribbon of dense muscle remained, contractions spun it into a swirl with blubber removed. She began boiling the harvest in a copper vat slotted atop the whalesoul engine. One strip boiled, while she cut the next. She was mid-cut when she smelled the burning of blubber and realised she almost ruined an entire strip of blubber. Tears welled up in her eyes, frustration the mind tried forcing into compassion for her tired body, but Nadeera did not want to hear about rest now. If she were to cry, it would be from precious effort wasted.

With her exhaustion reigned in she re-adjusted. Rigging counterweights she used to lower the knokkels on to her stump and mast, fashioning a belt from a kattedekop to lift herself in sweeping arcs across the decks —reminiscent of her days in the theatre— her pirouettes in tight dancing shoes had been replaced with sharpened anchor boots kicking into whale skin,

the twirls of a baton became midair swings that created leverage for her spade and flensing knife to soar through flesh.

At this pace she would need thirty-three more strips to complete one half of the whale. With twenty-six hours of boiling between the cutting she would need four days to strip the entirety of Fort. She was already behind the schedule she made up arbitrarily at the end of the first day of flensing.

By the end of the second day, Nadeera had grown so accustomed to the slaughter she did some stripping of her own. The helmet was first to go, too narrow a view to see everything inside, and it also stopped her from smelling when the blubber needed to be stirred. The chest plate came second, deemed too heavy for her grim flight. And having only the arms she deemed unfashionable, clashing with the rest of her outfit. Yet the heavy gloves remained. Cutting barehanded was too intimate, too close to the day she had clawed her way out of a whale with a piece of set dressing. She still remembered the splinters in the wooden edge, a phantom prick dug into her missing arm. Better to wear the thickest of gloves.

She kept her steel-toed boots, her leather trousers, and a blood-slick cotton shirt with no sleeves. It was easier to wash. More importantly, it made her feel free. At midday she would pause, stretch, eat, wash, and write. Three hours of rest, though filled mostly with more diagrams and hypotheses to make work faster. Then three more hours of cutting. Then dinner. Only then did she remember to pay attention to the others. She had asked for space that was not yet available, so to make sure she could continue working she had asked Fransje to sail out to the nearest outpost, to sell off the previous haul, combined with the amount of blubber and flesh needed from Fort to compensate the crew she had so quickly forgotten about. Three days of sailing

for a trade outpost called Vreugdes Punt.

When asked how she was faring, she remembered she promised to get to know the crew to Balthasar. So she shared stories of how much she reveled in the work, vivid and animated enough that even seasoned whalers with strong stomachs came to regret asking during dinnertime. She spoke of being drawn into oblivion by the horror of existence. She never embellished her loneliness. But only considered herself lonely at the dinner table. No one offered to help ease that burden. Nadeera assumed it was forbidden. That was fine. She preferred the wall she was building around herself with insurmountable tall tales. Strengthening the mythical castle of Nadeera.

These myths needed to be reinforced with actual deeds, so when she finished the right half of Fort's body, she had shaved her estimate down to twenty-five and a quarter hours. She had finished before Vreugdes Punt was in sight. It impressed the crew. It impressed herself. She was training her brain to measure without effort. To turn her body into a measuring scale, the length of her underarm called an el, the ship and mast a couple dozen of her els, strips of flesh carved to the exact arm-length to fill a barrel. The circumference of her upper thigh she used to determine volume of the storage jars, with her knee the size of the mouth. The duration of a blubber boil became a timescale, lest it be burnt and wasted.

Crewmembers were suddenly four to five slabs of whaleflesh tall, dinner took around three-quarters of a boil, a barrel of blubber weighed around one Nadeera. The heart weighed three Nadeeras, about one-fifth the weight of a knokkel. Ten Nadeera thighs of whale blood filled a barrel. She moved the barrels for the sell to the front, and managed to take a double break before Vreugdespunt arrived on the horizon. She spent it stretching

her muscles with Bettie, massaging the knots out of each others sore bodies, playing a game of cards with Jandrie and Batu, and catching up on chatter with Gitta, helping her peel root vegetables.

When they finally arrived at their destination. The crew leapt off for a warmly welcomed reprieve. Selling the work of the last three months, and spending their share on booze and company. For Nadeera, she continued to dissect, but spent one day on the shore under orders of Batu. She spent most of that day at the local Waag, comparing her measurements against the koopman's standards: measuring her underarm-lengths against the certified Scheepsoord meter. Around one point forty els fit to their rod. She practiced her own system against the merchant's stock, buying lengths of cloth equal to a strip of whale, which she estimated to be seven meters, she found herself accurate to within a fiftieth of an el. But Nadeera did not fare as well comparing her thighs against the sacred copper kilo.

She sparred with the other koopmannen with more estimates, their whole life measured to exactness. She hoped to learn from losing bets with professionals. To challenge them to measure the remains of Fort, to settle her estimates, to drink on tall tales told together. Rebuilding her path to understanding through shared butchery.

She carved the second side in the port of Vreugdespunt in twenty and three-quarter boils. Leaving only the bones, brains, and gorgeous eyes. The latter she removed with careful carving, cannonballs of now dimmed starlight bobbing in two jars of preserving liquid. Stored between other chunks of nervous system suspended in the appropriately named hold.

After the fifth day of carving, Silbrand approached.

“Are you going to extract the rest today or are you going to keep me tying knots until I’m one foot in the slijk?” he asked. Nadeera considered the sixty vasthoud knots that had to be redone over the past days. Each one a meticulous task and magical ritual, Nadeera’s hands ached thinking of tying more than three.

“Am I taking unusually long?” Nadeera asked in a tone she deemed appropriate.

“A normal moordnaar,” Silbrand grunted, pausing to spit over the railing, “would have killed a whale half this size for their promotion. They’d focus only on the blubber. Take three days. Same time a vasthoud knoop lasts. If you’d flensed faster, I wouldn’t have to tie them for the third time again tomorrow.”

Nadeera thought she was pretty fast, but had Bettie been faster? Nadeera considered her injury and the size of Fort as decent excuses. But decided not to argue with someone whose knots had kept her alive in many occasions “I’ll extract the brain tonight, you have my word. I won’t be needing more knots in the upcoming days.”

He smiled wide and clapped his hands together. “Appreciate your forthcoming. We wouldn’t want to waste a good knot, would we?” With that, Silbrand left as quickly as he appeared.

For a man whose life was tying knots, he seemed delighted when he did not have to. Nadeera felt she had to learn more about the philosophy of a knopenlegger, and maybe some more useful knots would make her do her job without annoying Silbrand as much.

* * *

Through the long hours of the night, Nadeera worked driven by

some resolve granted by not wanting to annoy Silbrand, while also proving him wrong. She sawed out balein first, removing long bristles nestled in the roof of Fort's upper jaw. Her hands, steady despite the tremor of fatigue, moved methodically as she dislodged each row of teeth, all the while boiling the remaining skin off bone in great black kettles, the scent of rendering flesh entrenched in her hair and pants.

She kept the real challenge a couple els away, the extraction of the brain, scared to fail right at the end. Her distracting thoughts caused her to cut her hand upon the sharp balein that recoiled against her, smearing her blood on the mast as she leaned against it. There she stared at the hole in the back of Fort's head and fantasised.

The fluid, once a thin amber, had hopefully transformed the brain's texture into something more pliable. It compressed under pressure and rebounded with its shape intact. At least that's what they saw with fish guts. Nadeera would have to see for herself if her sponge brain gambit worked. So until extraction she concerned herself with the removal and boiling of balein.

With no balein left at midnight Nadeera went to her pumps and cut the triangle hole to have enough space for both her arms. She pumped some of the excess preserving fluid into the ocean, while putting the breastplate and helmet back on her diving suit for the wrestling match she was about to have with the brain. She sealed the pump around the aperture with leather softening the sharp edge of the cut skull and turned on the machinery to suck the brain through the hole. Nadeera squeezing the brain where it resisted with her mighty arms, keeping the pump on until a significant chunk of it went through the widest hose, removing the tubing. And trying to massage the large brain through a significantly smaller hole. The brain retreated from Nadeera's

wrestling and shot back into the skull through the hole. Leaving the impatient Nadeera—while covered in preservative fluids—to consider a rematch while laying exhausted on the blood soaked deck.

She took a breather and decided to wait until she knew at the thickest part of the brain had made it through, she would later figure out how to determine the exact remaining thickness. She would rely on some sort of logic her aching muscles would provide. And after a quick stretch and another try with thicker hoses and more patient decisions made by a more rational brain, Nadeera tried again.

Nadeera made a circle with her arms around the aperture and pumped some of her violent blood to strengthen and pull the brain through, which grew wider on the other side. So she could use the now widened brain as anchorage to pull more out. And before her muscles had determined what the thickest part could possibly be. The brain shot from the hole, now in the correct direction. Sliding off the cloth Nadeera had placed to anticipate its landing. But there it was, that majestic grey matter: heavy, soft, two forearms wide and nearly four els long.

She pushed it into a glass jar: a wide-bellied thing she had bartered from a local tavern where it once held a bar's worth of pickled eggs and onions. Now it held the vast mystery of Fort's consciousness. She imagined what it cosmically meant to encase such a thing. What did it mean to steal the brain from a skull? What occult boundaries did she cross? Her mind kept Nadeera awake while she scrubbed the deck to remove the stench of vinegar and locally sourced fluids from the wood.

She went to bed in a similar state as Fort: head drained empty, muscles aching so much they felt unattached, while only her skeleton remains. Nadeera dreamt of bug sized creatures

drilling a hole into the back of her skull while she slept, remaining awake while her brain was drained and put into a large jug. How clever, to remove the brain while it remained attached to the nervous system. Would she have been the first creature to observe their brain nakedly exposed like this? The dream turned more metaphorical, which bored Nadeera, so she refused to remember it when she woke up. Only drawing an image of herself holding her own brain extracted by bug people.

The very next morning as Nadeera examined the infrastructure of Fort, she stared at the set of bones near the “hips” that Balthasar, ever the curious kaptein, would at one point have demanded to hand over. A vestigial thing, perhaps, but one he treated as if it were a delicacy. Nadeera, ever foolishly strategic, took it instead, she hid it away in her quarters—wrapped in oilcloth. She deemed it insurance. She had made more requests to make to her kaptein than most members aboard a whaling vessel dared in multiple lifetimes. It was only prudent to keep a token of leverage.

The rest of the bones formed a maze she would have stumbled through twenty-three months ago. But now, she saw the order of operations instantly, how one socket held another, how a joint mirrored her own anatomy. The fin bones looked more like fingers than flippers, even having the same number of bones. She was reminded of the legends of giants washed ashore: how keepers and coast guards might have come upon a whale’s ribcage detached from its skull one late night on patrol, only to believe they had discovered the remains of land-walking titans. Drawing horrific descriptions for the more land-locked countrymen.

Nadeera would not waste the bones on spreading fantasy. These bones could supply a lifetime of tools for a worker,

with careful carving the tips of the ribs could be turned into mouthpieces for an entire orchestra, and if she could just figure out what the reoccurring patterns in the bones represented, maybe, just maybe, could Nadeera stop worrying about what Momat tried to tell her about “secrets hidden in remains”.

She arranged the bones by mass and dimension, numbered and diagrammed them with the fastidiousness of a museum archivist. And when the final bone had disappeared below deck she began putting all her findings together in a diagram, spanning multiple pages stitched together. Slowly, she outlined the pieces of Fort in her journal. She mapped the veins and imagined the volume of blood required to fill them. She weighed the warmth of blubber hidden beneath the skin, she calculated the area of skin wrapped around the entirety of Fort—and suddenly—a thought arrived that stilled her pen.

She had written, unintentionally, the recipe to construct a whale.

Could she rebuild him with other parts found in different creatures? Was there a possibility, if she did it perfectly, that the same Fort could come out? These questions haunted her as she finalized her work. Within these final hours, the skeletal remains had been scrubbed, cataloged, and stored beneath the deck. There was only one trace of the struggle, a splotch of Nadeera’s blood against the mast, mixed with fort’s blood had missed her gaze as she was scrubbing the deck. She held her hand against the stain.

If those hypothetical poachers finally caught her and disassembled her until not a single trace of her living existence remained, how would she remain? If one were to scour the world for all her parts, could she be reassembled again? She thought of that final trace of Fort’s existence lingering within her, the dirge

he had sung that shattered her inner ear and left her unconscious for three days. She started humming the song while touching the very spot where their blood intermingled. She was inadvertently standing in the very spot of the deck where Batu could speak his words into every ear on the ship.

A vibration came from that place of command. Nadeera needed to speak back to Fort's final call. To match it. To tell the sea it had been heard. Her hum had to come from deeper if she wished to reach the power of a whalesong, she felt that her frame did not do Fort justice.

"Did it have to?"

She drew breath from the pit of her stomach, from the marrow of her spine, and forced it through her throat until her jaw ached. The timbre was imperfect, straining against her human anatomy. De Jonke Rots creaked under the pressure of the vibrations she forced through the planks.

She sang the song in remembrance of Fort. She sang for the idea that if she were to be dissected, that at least the moordnaars would remember her songs. She sang for those moordnaars across distant oceans to feel pain, she sang for whales hoping the echo would reach them. Let them feel the sorrow and strength of the one they lost. Let them know he was remembered.

Fort would live through art Nadeera would create from him, through this howling that shook the crew awake, who all gathered quietly at the edge of the deck. They did not interrupt. Her lifelong devotion of strength and performance mimicked only a fraction of that ancient wisdom she extinguished.

Nadeera, once a performer creating and moving worlds, was now a butcher taking someone else's. What came next, she did not know.

But if the whales could have heard her call—and if she could

have understood their reply—perhaps then would she have known.

END OF BOOK ONE