

[14]

--DRAMATIS PERSONAE--

Red Tide, Enchantress of the 3rd Renown, The Reef, plotting

Cuda Bite, Skulker of the 1st Renown, The Reef, plotting

Beyond Reach, Trident Master of the 3rd Renown, The Reef, plotting

Turtle Jaw, Quill of The Reef, digging

Salt Wall, Berserker of the 2nd Renown, The Reef, big

23 New Summer, 61 AW.

The Central Sea, heading north

277 days until the next Granting.

They reached land the next morning. The five of them came ashore on one of the northern continent's sad beaches. Red Tide didn't know her geography so well, especially not the north, but they didn't seem close to any of the continent's famous port cities. She'd never before set foot on the northern continent. The sky was grayer, the air crisper, and the rocks the same. All in all, Red Tide wasn't impressed.

"You know where we're at?" she asked Salt Wall as the two of them plodded out of the water on wobbly legs. The transition back to walking -- back to the weight of gravity and the gulping of air through the lungs - it was never easy.

Salt Wall cocked her square-shaped head. "Beast country, I think," she said. "We killing the warden now?"

Frowning, Red Tide glanced over to where Cuda Bite had flopped down in the muddy sand. "The little guy talk you around to that?"

"Said it was your idea."

Red Tide chuckled. "He's an eel, that one."

Salt Wall peeled the seaweed bandages away from her palms. The half-moon cuts from the anchoreel's teeth were already scabbed over and shrinking. "Not your idea, then?"

Red Tide hesitated. Beyond Reach had come ashore further down the beach, away from the others. He squatted there with his hands still in the water, staring back the way they'd come. She could read in the hunch of his shoulders that something bothered him. On the Ink map that Turtle Jaw had summoned, there had been something in pursuit. Red Tide wondered how close that was now.

"No killing yet," Red Tide told Salt Wall. "But the day is young."

As he'd led them there, it was unsurprising that Turtle Jaw alone seemed to know his purpose on the beach. There was a patch of receding woods not far off, toppled and petrified logs stretching across the sand. Turtle Jaw stomped his way toward the edge of the woods and began investigating the logs. He turned a couple over before putting his hands on his hips in frustration and glancing up to check the position of the sun.

"Truly a turtle now," Red Tide said. "Looking for a place to drop his eggs."

Salt Wall snorted.

Red Tide sauntered across the sand to join Turtle Jaw and Salt Wall followed. The two women reached him just as he shoved aside another log, revealing a seaweed-covered recess beneath. Turtle Jaw kicked aside the detritus, clearing out what was obviously an intentionally dug hole. Hidden in the shallow pit was a clamshell cache. Turtle Jaw wrapped his thick arms around the clamshell, which was bigger than his torso, and dragged it free. There was a second, larger clamshell cache buried beneath the first.

He glanced at Red Tide and Salt Wall. "Good. Help me with that other one, would you?"

"I don't think I will," she replied. "Not without some answers."

"How about you?" he asked Salt Wall, sighing when she shook her head and crossed her brawny arms. "Fine. I'll do it myself."

"There's some talk about killing you," Red Tide told the warden.

"Surprised it's taken this long, but I suppose the mindset of captivity isn't easily shook." Turtle Jaw responded. He bent over the clamshell cache and started jimmying it loose from the sand. "Beyond Reach won't allow that."

Red Tide glanced over her shoulder. "Nearly got himself eaten yesterday. He don't impress me."

"Had a feeling you two would hit it off," Turtle Jaw said. "It's true I don't like our odds if it's three-against-two, but you'll get more than a bloody nose for your trouble Red, I promise."

Red Tide held up her hands. "Don't get your feelings hurt, warden. I said it's just talk."

Turtle Jaw groaned as he wrestled the larger clamshell cache free of the pit, eventually flopping onto his back as he pulled the chest onto the sand. "I'm already down. Here's your chance, Red. I'll lay right here until you find a rock large enough to smash my head in."

“You got a big head,” Red Tide said.

Salt Wall nudged her and pointed down the shore. “I see some.”

Red Tide patted the berserker on the shoulder, but kept her attention on Turtle Jaw. “Where are you bringing us?”

He gestured toward the woods. “We’re going overland to meet some people who might share our interests.”

“Vague,” Red Tide said. “Try again.”

“There’s some thought that we might forge an alliance before the next Granting,” Turtle Jaw said, looking up at her from his back. “Give you all a better chance of surviving.”

“Since when does the queen make moves like that?”

“She doesn’t,” Turtle Jaw said.

“Your idea, then?”

“I got tired of sending four cons off to die every year,” Turtle Jaw said. “Thought maybe we might try to actually win one of these things. Turns out, I’m not the only one who’s sick of playing nice.”

Red Tide thought back to the warden’s sea song. He’d lamented lost years, but with a gilding of optimism. That added up, at least.

“You didn’t tell me any of this when I took the Ink,” she said.

“Me neither,” Salt Wall chimed in.

“Couldn’t risk someone talking out of turn before we got clear of the Grotto,” Turtle Jaw said.

“This is a better deal, isn’t it? Now you got a chance.”

“I always had a chance,” Red Tide replied, clicking her nails against her teeth. “But I also had a year of liberty and leisure to look forward to.”

“You think that’s how it plays out?” Turtle Jaw asked. “You’d have sat around that cell until the Granting, growing mold on your Ink. The four of you wouldn’t have even met until the Granting. Queen decided it was too dangerous to have all that Ink together.”

Red Tide shook her head, the beads at the ends of her braids tinkling. “Queen will be after us now, won’t she? She’s going to hang you in the sun right next to us, Turtle Jaw.”

“Only if she catches us,” he replied and smiled. He was having fun, Red Tide realized. Despite her annoyance at being misled, Red Tide smiled back.

Salt Wall jabbed the smaller clamshell cache with her toes. “What’s in here?”

“Gifts from our friends,” Turtle Jaw said. “Go ahead and open them. You’ll know what belongs to who.”

Red Tide exchanged a look with Salt Wall, then the two of them crouched down in the sand. The clamshell caches had long been used amongst the oca’em to store supplies throughout the Central Sea, although that practice had waned somewhat as the Reef shriveled and the pods stayed closer to what was left of their home. The shells were smooth, pink, and hard as diamonds. To pry open a clamshell, land-walkers would need a team of strong men, tools, perhaps a pulley and winch. For oca’em, the process was much simpler. The oils in their touch reacted with the ridged lips of the clams. Red Tide simply had to brush her fingers across the sealed opening and the clam would slowly open for her. Salt Wall did the same.

Inside her chest, Red Tide found some neatly arranged clothes and pieces of armor. She held up a dark blue ward-weave tunic against her chest.

“You want me dressed so badly, warden?” she asked. “I won’t be able to swim in this.”

“Like I said, we’ll be going overland,” Turtle Jaw said. “The four of you will need to get used to fighting on two feet. There’s never enough water at any of these.”

Red Tide pulled on the tunic, a set of loose ward-weave pants, and soft boots. The fit was perfect.

“You sneak into my cell and get measurements, old man?”

“I value my neck too much for that,” he replied.

“Don’t seem the way to me.”

Next, Red Tide found a pouch containing shards of coral in sunset shades and immediately felt her Ink tingle in response. She held one of her fingers over a piece of coral, focused on it, and reached for **[Coral Tender]**. She coaxed the shard just enough so that it extended to a sharpened point that pricked her finger.

“Beautiful,” she said.

Meanwhile, Salt Wall had jammed herself into a titanium breastplate that fit snugly across her broad chest. She’d also discovered a menacing looking hook with an opening that fit over her hand like a gauntlet. Salt Wall swiped the weapon back and forth at gut-level, her triceps rippling, and Red Tide could practically hear warm intestines spilling onto the ground.

“Very good,” Salt Wall declared.

There were ward-weave clothes for Turtle Jaw, as well. He strapped a short sword to his hip and donned a necklace of some sea shaman tokens that Red Tide couldn’t immediately identify. He caught her looking at them and pumped his eyebrows before hiding them beneath his shirt.

“What the shit?” Cuda Bite asked as he came moseying over. “You guys found buried treasure?”

Red Tide had considered keeping the dagger she found in the chest for herself, but instead she tossed it lightly to Cuda Bite. He snagged the blade out of the air and unsheathed it in the same motion, bouncing the weapon from hand to hand. The dagger’s blade was blue-tinged, which indicated it’d been forged partly with cobalt.

“You’re good with that,” Red Tide remarked.

“Easy to look slick with a knife like this,” Cuda Bite said. “Never had anything this nice.”

Noticing the exchange, Turtle Jaw nodded to Red Tide. “His dagger’s got coral laid in the cross guard. In case that’s of interest to you.”

Reaching out with her new sense, Red Tide felt the delicate weave of coral veined between Cuda Bite’s blade and handle. “You been thinking ahead, haven’t you?”

“Ever since I saw your Ink,” Turtle Jaw replied. “It’s my job as Quill to make sure you get the most from your abilities.”

“So I take it we aren’t murdering the warden?” Cuda Bite asked. He shrugged on his own ward-weave tunic, whistling as he poked at the arcane shielding symbols blended into the fabric. “This is expensive stuff. You get rich sitting on your ass in the Grotto?”

“It’s an investment, but not mine.”

Red Tide followed Turtle Jaw’s gaze to where Beyond Reach still crouched at the water’s edge. So, he was an uptight Horizdock brat and he came from money. How did someone like that end up in the Grotto? There was still much that Red Tide didn’t understand about their situation, but these gifts had bought Turtle Jaw some time before she pressed him further.

“I’m not writing any thank you notes,” Red Tide muttered.

Salt Wall tapped her shoulder. “Think this is yours, Red.”

The instrument looked like such a fragile thing in Salt Wall’s huge hands that Red Tide almost snatched it away from her. After a deep breath, she managed to accept the harp gently, dancing her fingers across the polished frame. Red Tide had never seen a finer instrument. The yellowish-pink frame was shaped from conch and must have been crafted by some arcane artistry, because there was no way to otherwise manipulate seashell so elegantly. Fresh strings glittered in the sunlight. She slung the instrument over her shoulder by its seaweed strap, the ugliness of which she could forgive as it was studded by growths of aquamarine coral.

Red Tide brushed the back of her hand across the strings, creating a sound not unlike a breeze on a warm day. She smirked as Cuda Bite’s narrow shoulders shimmied with rapture.

“Damn, Red,” he said. “That’s fine.”

“You pick this out for me, Turtle Jaw?” she asked.

The warden shrugged. “Had it made, actually.”

Red Tide lunged for him, squeezing one arm around his thick neck and pressing her lips to the side of his face. She kissed his cheek, nipped his jaw, and whispered in his ear, “I’m going to kill so many men for you.”

“Pardon me.”

Beyond Reach had arrived. He brushed between Salt Wall and Cuda Bite without looking at them, reaching into the chests as if he knew exactly what would be there. He donned a shirt of

lightweight mail and hid it beneath a hooded ward-weave cloak. Before he clothed himself, Red Tide noticed how the [Alert] Ink on his chest had faded.

“What happened to you?” she asked.

“Pushed it too far,” Beyond Reach said with a dismissive sniff. “Like I told you yesterday, my attention was elsewhere.”

“On what?”

Without answering her, Beyond Reach set to work assembling the trident that had been packed carefully in the larger clamshell, broken down into three sections. Red Tide had to admit that the weapon was impressive – gold-plated, sleek, its triple-pronged killing end sharpened and barbed. There were dents and scars down the length of the trident that hadn’t been completely buffed out. The weapon had seen some use, and Beyond Reach was proud of that fact. He handled his trident with the same reverence as Red Tide did her new harp.

“They’re closer than we thought,” Beyond Reach announced as he tightened the handle of his weapon. He looked at Turtle Jaw like this was the resumption of an earlier conversation. “They’ll be here in little more than an hour.”

“Who will be here?” Red Tide asked, her tone sharpening. “Ignore me again and you’ll regret it.”

Beyond Reach met her eyes. “A pod of Coralline Elite.”

“What the fuck?” Cuda Bite exclaimed. “What do those guys want?”

“Warden’s gone rogue,” Salt Wall said. “We aren’t supposed to be out here.”

“What the fuck?” Cuda Bite repeated.

Red Tide squinted at Turtle Jaw. "You said the gods give trials for more Ink. I figured you meant hunting beasts or scaling mountains or some shit."

He shrugged. "Sometimes that's how it goes."

"And sometimes the gods mark a mortal as a worthy test for champions," Beyond Reach said. "I suspect it's Most Loyal Spear leading the pod."

Red Tide's lips curled back. Most Loyal Spear was the queen's personal bodyguard. She'd only seen him once and it had been during her trial before the queen. When Red Tide had told the queen to fuck herself, Most Loyal Spear had looked as if he might twist Red Tide's head off right then and there.

"We can outpace them through the woods," Turtle Jaw said. "They won't be able to track us so easily on land. They won't want to."

"That's one thought," Beyond Reach replied. He drummed his fingers on the handle of his trident, waiting for someone else to speak.

Red Tide took the bait. "What you got in mind?"

"We don't want them lurking in our wake," he said. "We meet them here. Get a little practice."

Cuda Bite edged backward. "What kind of practice?"

Beyond Reach smiled in a way that Red Tide recognized. She'd seen it in the mirror.

"Killing practice."

[15]

--DRAMATIS PERSONAE--

Red Tide, Enchantress of the 3rd Renown, The Reef, ready to make music

Beyond Reach, Trident Master of the 3rd Renown, The Reef, not actually his name

Turtle Jaw, Quill of The Reef, in a bit of trouble with his boss

Cuda Bite, Skulker of the 1st Renown, The Reef, not enamored with this whole plan

Salt Wall, Berserker of the 2nd Renown, The Reef, doesn't mind the odds

A pod of Coralline Elite led by the queen's personal bodyguard, Most Loyal Spear

23 New Summer, 61 AW.

The Central Sea, heading north

277 days until the next Granting.

Beyond Reach had been wrong about one thing. The pod of Coralline Elite emerged from the water less than an hour later. Barely enough time for the four champions and their Quill to put together a strategy. As plans went, Red Tide knew, it wasn't much of one. Perhaps enough of a surprise to even the numbers some. But after that, it would be a fight.

A bloody fight, by the look of things.

The Coralline Elite stalked up the beach in a tight formation. There were eleven in total. Each of them wore bodysuits of dark blue deep-silk augmented with wards for speed, plus armored fins of razor-

sharp sea glass at their forearms and shins. The wards on their deep-silk were dim, which meant they'd overdrawn the arcane energy imbued there chasing down the champions. Red Tide didn't see any protective wards weaved into the deep-silk. That was one advantage the champions would have, at least. The Coralline Elite were outfitted to cut through water and strike while submerged. They weren't armored to survive a land battle.

Still, there were six armed with javelins and four who shouldered harpoon-flingers. Leading them, just as Beyond Reach had predicted, was Most Loyal Spear. He was an impressive specimen, rigid of posture and hard of body. The sides of his head were shaved and he styled his braids in a pile that resembled a shark's fin. He carried two spears – each shorter than the javelins his pod carried – but connected by a length of chain. For the moment, Most Loyal Spear kept the chain slung across the back of his neck, the handles of his twin weapons bouncing against his broad chest.

They were lucky not to have met this pod out in the water. The Coralline Elite were the queen's personal enforcement arm. They were responsible for bringing justice to oca'em pods that ranged too far from The Reef, into waters that might disturb the queen's pathetic peace with the land-walkers. They were also charged with crushing any opposition that might bubble up against the queen herself. It had been a pod of Coralline Elite that arrested Red Tide after the untimely immolation of the fool merchant captain Juseph Grice-Russi. She told herself that it was the burns on her back that kept her from fighting them off, but in truth Red Tide knew it would've been a losing battle against the synchronized blood-letting of the highly trained pod.

"I respect what you can do," Beyond Reach murmured to Red Tide as they watched the Coralline Elite's methodical approach. "I respect what you've *done*."

"What?" Red Tide replied, blinking. "This some kind of deathbed confession?"

“I don’t intend to die here, and I suspect the same of you,” Beyond Reach continued. “But these others... have you considered that we might have a better chance of survival on the island with stronger partners?”

Red Tide gritted her teeth and said nothing. This pompous fool and his machinations would have to wait until the present business was over.

The champions had done some rearranging while they awaited their hunters. They’d positioned the open clamshell caches between some stacks of driftwood, creating a natural-looking barricade. Turtle Jaw and Salt Wall knelt behind one clamshell while Red Tide and the suddenly chatty Beyond Reach crouched behind the other. They stood up as one as the Coralline Elite drew nearer, looking as if they’d been in the process of rummaging through the chests. They wanted to give off an aura of unpreparedness, and had wanted cover in case the Coralline greeted them with harpoons. Fortunately, it seemed like Most Loyal Spear intended to talk first.

Meanwhile, Cuda Bite sat to the side of the driftwood, bleeding from a freshly punched nose, his hands tied with rope. He wiggled and whined.

“You hit me too hard,” he said to Salt Wall, a whistle in his breathing.

“Shut up,” the berserker replied.

The sun was high but behind clouds, creating milky shadows across the beach. The wind picked up and Red Tide smelled sweat and salt. At a raised fist from Most Loyal Spear, the Coralline Elite stopped thirty yards away, fanning out, spearmen in front of harpooners. Red Tide hugged her harp against her stomach.

“Is that you, Most Loyal Spear?” Turtle Jaw shouted in greeting. “What are you doing out here?”

“I could ask you the same question, warden,” came Most Loyal Spear’s gravelly reply. “Except, I already know the answer.”

“You do?”

“Rebellion,” said Most Loyal Spear. “Insurrection.”

Turtle Jaw chuckled. “Grave charges. But I’ve only brought our party here in an attempt to earn them Ink.” The warden’s gaze left Most Loyal Spear and flitted over the rest of the pod. “Who could begrudge the Reef’s champions an improved chance at survival?”

Stony expressions greeted Turtle Jaw’s words. They wouldn’t find any defectors amongst this pod. Still, Red Tide scanned the expressions of the spearmen and harpooners, searching for weakness. She felt the tickle of the Ink on her chest as **[Awareness+]** heightened her senses, drawing her gaze to a younger spearmen on Most Loyal Spear’s left. His hands trembled ever so slightly on his weapon. Red Tide caught his eye and slowly smiled. The weakest of the bunch. He would do.

“Do not play games with me, warden,” Most Loyal Spear said. “You know the boundaries of your role as Quill. You were not to leave the Grotto.”

“What’s the point of sending four year after year if we don’t even give them a chance?” Turtle Jaw asked. “Would you send your pod to a slaughter without any training?”

“Irrelevant,” Most Loyal Spear replied. “These are arguments you should have put before the queen.”

“I did,” Turtle Jaw snapped. “She doesn’t listen.”

“Neither do you. I was with you in the palace on the day Throne Gazer was entrusted to your custody, warden. Do you not recall that conversation? You were given specific instructions that Throne

Gazer was not to be selected as a champion. The queen forbade it. Do you deny this further insubordination?"

Red Tide cocked her head. "Did he say Throne Gazer?"

"Indeed," Beyond Reach replied. "He names me."

Red Tide turned to stare at the trident master beside her and she sensed Cuda Bite doing the same. Of course Beyond Reach's naming song would've been light on details. He hadn't shared his true name with them, nor the anchors chained to it.

Throne Gazer. Now, even spoken in the air instead of sung, that was a name which meant something to Red Tide. The Queen of the Coralline Throne had no offspring of her own, but she did have a sister called Deep Dweller and that sea witch had raised a single son. There had been rumors about the boy, probably started by Deep Dweller herself. He was a special one. Born into portentous waters or some other prophetic nonsense that Deep Dweller read in the milking of squid. Her special child had been groomed by Deep Dweller to lead the Reef into renewed prosperity.

Of course, the Queen of the Coralline Throne had disagreed with her sister's reading of the charts.

When was the coup? Four years back? Red Tide's own father had gotten swept up in it, arrested by the Coralline Elite, and executed. Deep Dweller and her chosen one had failed miserably, although Red Tide remembered the coup fondly because at least it had loosed her from her father.

And now, the wannabe king stood next to her. Beyond Reach. Throne Gazer. One and the same.

Red Tide laughed incredulously. "Throne Gazer," she gasped, "unbelievable."

The man beside her squared his shoulders. "He tells the truth of it. I am the promised king."

“The living laughingstock!” Red Tide wiped the back of her hand across her eyes, barely controlling her laughter. “Throne Gazer! You’re a fucking joke!”

Throne Gazer tensed. “A pod of Coralline Elite sent to hunt me down would suggest otherwise.”

“Actually, I would agree with the outlaw,” intoned Most Loyal Spear. “The queen is burdened by sentiment for her wayward nephew. She has fond memories of bouncing you upon her knee. And so, I have been dispatched to return you home alive.”

“I am not going back,” Throne Gazer replied. “And I’ll remember the faces of all who stand against me.”

“You *will* return, bloodied and chastened,” Most Loyal Spear said with the tired patience of a court tutor. “As for you other three, your survival is optional. You will be allowed to keep your Ink. You may fight for your freedom at the Granting as agreed, but you will wait for that opportunity within the safety of the Grotto. Should you choose not to return peacefully, you will be killed.”

Cuda Bite chose that moment to stagger to his feet, snorting blood out of his nose. “Sir, I just went where the warden told me to go. Only today did their nefarious plans become clear,” he said. “They beat me and bound me when I wouldn’t agree to lay an ambush for you.”

Snarling, Red Tide kicked sand in Cuda Bite’s direction, but the narrow-boned skulker raised his bound hands to ward her off. He scampered further down the beach, entering the empty space between the Reef’s champions and the Coralline Elite.

Most Loyal Spear made a noise of disgust, then nodded to one of his spearmen. “Check him.”

As the spearman started toward Cuda Bite, Turtle Jaw spoke up. “What about me? Am I to return to face the queen’s judgement?”

“No,” Most Loyal Spear replied. “You will die here, warden. I have been given leave to choose your level of suffering.”

“I hope you savor that rare taste of independence,” Turtle Jaw said. “But what happens after? Do you know how it works when a Quill dies?”

“The queen herself will assume the responsibility.”

Turtle Jaw held up a finger. “If I die, the gods choose my replacement. They shall peer into the hearts of our people and choose who best represents them. Is the queen confident that will be her?”

Most Loyal Spear rolled his shoulders. “If your successor proves unsuitable, I will visit them next.”

While the two men spoke, Red Tide eyed Most Loyal Spear’s throat. He was marked with the same dolphin symbol as the rest of them, yet the Ink there appeared to pulse. She wondered if Most Loyal Spear knew how his tattoo looked ripe and ready to burst. She nudged Beyond—ah, Throne Gazer.

“You see his neck, your grace?” Red Tide murmured.

In answer, Throne Gazer exhaled sharply through his nose. She took that to mean he was still offended and wouldn’t engage with her, but she saw how he sized up Most Loyal Spear.

“A rich prize,” Red Tide said with a smirk.

Meanwhile, the spearman had finished thoroughly searching Cuda Bite and found no weapons on him. After checking his bonds, he grabbed the skulker roughly by the shoulder and shoved him in the direction of the Coralline Elite. Cuda Bite stumbled through the line of spearmen. One of the harpooners grabbed and held him by the back of his neck.

Red Tide chose that moment to pluck the first notes on her harp. The **[Hypnotic Object]** Ink on her chest felt warmly encouraging. All eyes were pulled toward her.

“The ge’oca blessed me,” Red Tide said, and her words carried almost like sea song, invoking images of the holy leviathan that lurked in the depths. “They praised me for my vengeance, and they sent you here as my reward.”

The Coralline Elite shifted uneasily as Red Tide’s fingers danced across the strings. Most Loyal Spear cocked his head like he was trying shake water out of his ear. “What is this?” he grunted.

“Your Ink overflows, Most Loyal Spear,” Red Tide continued, her voice like a thundercloud, her harp’s notes like raindrops. “The gods have made you a prize for us. Would you thwart their will? Would you obey your queen if it meant denying the sea itself?”

Some of the spearmen glanced sidelong at their leader, surely noticing the juicy throb of the Ink on his neck. They readjusted their grips on their weapons and shuffled their feet. Red Tide had their attention. She made them doubt. She made them slow to react.

“Silence her,” Most Loyal Spear said. “Quickly.”

Cuda Bite spotted his opening. He reached for **[Hidden Blade]** and his dagger manifested in his two bound hands. Without warning, Cuda Bite stabbed the blade into the sternum of the harpooner holding him. He let the blade hang there for a moment, releasing it, so that he could swiftly rake his bonds across the edge and cut himself free, catching the dagger as it slipped from the dying harpooner’s chest.

Stunned, the harpooner pulled the trigger on his flinger, impaling the spearman in front of him.

Another harpooner screamed and pivoted to aim her weapon at Cuda Bite. Less than three feet separated them when she pulled the trigger.

Cuda Bite disappeared, falling into the shadow cast by one of the spearmen. The harpoon meant for him instead buried itself in the cheek of another spearman. Using **[Shadow Step]**, Cuda Bite popped loose from the shadow of the confused woman who'd fired upon him, stabbing her three times in the back before one of her fellows took a run at him.

Red Tide smiled. The little skulker was deliciously lethal. His chaos was fierce while her music made the Elite slow to respond.

Cuda Bite darted around a spear thrust meant to gut him, then dove headfirst for another harpoonee's shadow. Instead of disappearing, though, he landed on his face in the sand with a high-pitched grunt.

"Once?" he shouted. "My fucking Ink only works *once*?"

If not for the languid melody flowing from Red Tide's fingers, Cuda Bite would've been skewered from multiple directions. With three of their number already down, the rest of the Elite were only now shaking out of their trance and entering their fighting positions. Red Tide kept her eyes locked on the spearman she'd chosen, the one her **[Awareness+]** had identified as the weakest.

"Don't let them hurt my friend," Red Tide whispered, and her words were carried by the music straight into the spearman's ears.

Red Tide's spearman flung himself backwards, directly into a javelin that had been meant for Cuda Bite. The Elite who'd rammed his weapon into his compatriot's stomach shouted in dismay. Cuda Bite used the opportunity to lunge to his feet and sprint back toward the others.

"I did my part!" he screamed. "Now save my ass!"

Bellowing, Salt Wall rumbled out to meet the spearmen who chased Cuda Bite, her hook beckoning them forward.

Distracted by Cuda Bite's escape, Red Tide didn't see which of the harpooners fired at her, finally obeying Most Loyal Spear's command to shut her up. She received no warning from the trident master standing next to her.

The harpoon struck Red Tide just below her left breast and knocked her off her feet.

Her harp bounced from her grasp.

The battle truly started with Red Tide on her back.

[16]

--DRAMATIS PERSONAE--

Red Tide, Enchantress of the 3rd Renown, The Reef, her song interrupted

Throne Gazer, Trident Master of the 3rd Renown, The Reef, not a team player

Turtle Jaw, Quill of The Reef, not a natural swordsman

Cuda Bite, Skulker of the 1st Renown, The Reef, learning his limitations

Salt Wall, Berserker of the 2nd Renown, The Reef, has a hook

A pod of Coralline Elite, some dead or dying, led by the queen's personal bodyguard, Most Loyal Spear

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The harpoon would've been lethal if not for the ward-weave tunic. Instead, the harpoon shaft snapped and the sea glass head shattered as the ward flared.

As Red Tide gasped for air, Throne Gazer didn't so much as glance in her direction. He leveled his fancy trident at Most Loyal Spear. The weapon crackled with energy as Throne Gazer activated **[Eel Sting]**, a fork of lightning streaking forth and connecting with Most Loyal Spear's chest. The Coralline Elite's leader was flung backward, smoking, landing out in the water.

Meanwhile, as one spearman pursued Cuda Bite up the beach, the other two met Salt Wall in open space. The berserker swung her hook at the first to close, but he ducked underneath and went low, raking his bladed forearm against the side of Salt Wall's thigh. She roared and tried to spin, but the second spearman lunged into the gap left by the first, his blade scraping across Salt Wall's armor. The first spearman kept moving, continuing up the beach, focused not on Salt Wall but on Turtle Jaw.

"Ah, shit," the warden said, clumsily drawing his short sword. In his years as warden, Turtle Jaw had plenty of experience in skirmishes and brawls, but he'd never tangled with a warrior like a Coralline Elite.

Throne Gazer snorted as Turtle Jaw began a series of clumsy parries against the spearman. He started in that direction, until a harpoon whizzed by his face. His beaded braids clicked together as his head snapped toward the two surviving harpoon flingers.

"Hold on, warden," Throne Gazer said, then took a bounding step toward the harpooners and accessed **[Vault]**. He shot into the air in a showy arc, one knee bent, his trident cocked back. The harpooners weren't ready for one of their enemies to take flight, nor were they ready for Throne Gazer's accuracy with his trident. At the peak of his jump, he flung the weapon downward, shearing through the belly of one of the harpooners. Flexing his hand, he activated **[Weapon Return]** and the trident snapped back to his grasp, dragging a streamer of entrails with it.

Throne Gazer landed in front of the second harpooner, who was desperately trying to reload his weapon. With one delicate thrust, Throne Gazer pushed his trident through the man's throat.

Unfortunately, Throne Gazer hadn't seen Most Loyal Spear emerge from the surf behind him.

Flowing forward with a grace that belied his rigid posture, Most Loyal Spear plunged one of his chained spears into the soft tissue at the back of Throne Gazer's knee. The trident master screamed and

fell forward, twisting as he went, trying to bring his weapon around for a counterattack. With a deft maneuver, Most Loyal Spear caught the handle of the trident in a tangle of chain and wrenched the weapon from Throne Gazer's hands.

"You stupid boy," Most Loyal Spear said. "The oca'em you have murdered today were more valuable to the Reef than you will ever be."

With that, he smashed the haft of a spear onto the crown of Throne Gazer's head. The trident master crumpled unconscious in the surf.

Coughing bitterly, Red Tide staggered to her feet. On her right, Cuda Bite had turned to face his pursuer, circling the spearman but unable to get close enough to put his dagger to work. On her left, Turtle Jaw, bleeding from a deep gash in his side, stumbled backward as his attacker swatted aside a sloppy sword strike. And, straight ahead, Salt Wall let out a ferocious cry as she caught a spearhead with her bare hand, reeled her opponent in close, and drove her hooked hand down onto the top of his head. The hook's point erupted from behind the spearman's eyeball and, with a foot thrust into his chest, Salt Wall yanked her weapon out through his face.

Well, at least she didn't have to worry about the berserker, Red Tide mused.

Trusting that Cuda Bite was too slippery to kill, Red Tide chose to aid Turtle Jaw. Only as she ran toward the warden and the spearman did Red Tide realize she wasn't holding a weapon. There hadn't been anything for her in the clamshell chests—just bits of coral and a harp.

She would have to use her hands.

Turtle Jaw let out a shout as the spearman stabbed into the front of his thigh. He brought his sword down awkwardly across the spear's haft, an attack which the spearman lightly brushed away. In the same motion, he swiped the butt of the spear across Turtle Jaw's ankles. The warden's legs were

knocked out from under him, his sword bouncing from his grasp. He was laid out in the sand at the spearman's feet.

"Look out behind you," Turtle Jaw said.

The spearman snorted. "Fuck you."

Red Tide leapt onto his back. She dug her nails across the spearman's cheeks, going for his eyes. He quickly adjusted, though, grabbing Red Tide by the braids and flipping her over his shoulder. She landed on her back in the sand next to Turtle Jaw and had to immediately roll to the side to avoid a spear plunged into the beach.

The spearman didn't retrieve his weapon. He needed both hands to grope at his face.

"What... what did you do to me?"

Red Tide hadn't yet seen the results of her **[Poisonous]** touch. Her fingers had left trails of greenish-brown across the spearman's gray-skinned face. The flesh there was puckered and sunken, like an overripe fruit. The spearman tried to rub at his face—and that proved a mistake. His skin sloughed free in chunks. Red Tide caught a glimpse of the man's pale white jawbone before he collapsed into the sand.

"Wish I hadn't seen that," Turtle Jaw remarked.

Red Tide felt the **[Poisonous]** Ink on her chest fade. She sensed that she could've held back some, maybe kept some of that ability in reserve. "Got carried away," she said.

"Saved my life, Red, so I'm not complaining," Turtle Jaw reached for his sword and tried to stand up, but he fell backward into the sand. Blood bubbled from the stab wound in his thigh and the gash in his side wasn't any prettier. "I need a minute."

“Stay down,” Red Tide hissed. “Dumb bastard.”

Down the beach, Cuda Bite was still leading the last remaining spearman on a merry chase, using his quickness to stay ahead of the Elite’s stabs and swipes. The spearman actually looked to be flagging somewhat, spitting thick white flecks with each increasingly sloppy attack.

Twenty yards away, Most Loyal Spear appeared to be using a similar strategy against Salt Wall. The berserker’s combination of **[Bloodlust]**, **[Numb]**, and **[Recovery+]** made her a formidable opponent—Red Tide had seen that firsthand during the anchoreel’s attack. Salt Wall didn’t even feel the deep cuts across her arms and legs, or her bleeding hand. In fact, the wounds only increased the ferocity of her attacks. But with every big, looping swing of Salt Wall’s hook, Most Loyal Spear simply danced away. He pitched his spears at Salt Wall, letting them stab into her ward-weave armor before reeling them back by their chains. Every flare of a ward meant Salt Wall’s armor was a little less effective, and the sand had turned dark pink around her feet from the blood loss. Much of Red Tide’s own Ink had faded; she wondered how much Salt Wall had left.

“First thing’s first,” Red Tide grunted.

She grabbed the spear her last kill had dropped and dipped its blade into the slurry where his face had once been. Then, she charged down the beach toward Cuda Bite. The skulker saw her coming and tried to angle his ducking and dodging so the spearman would be caught by surprise.

Red Tide thrust for his head with the spear, but the Elite sensed her attack at the last moment and pivoted. Her spear dug through the Elite’s shoulder—it hardly slowed him down. Now it was Red Tide’s turn to clumsily backpedal as the spearman stabbed at her. She managed to bat away a couple of his attacks, but his third knocked the spear from her hands. As he prepared for another swing, his shoulder gave out. The spearman yelped in alarm as he realized he couldn’t raise his arm, looking down to see goopy boils rising from his wound.

“Tricky bi—“

Before he could finish, Cuda Bite sidled up behind the spearman and dragged his dagger across the man’s throat.

“You good?” he asked Red Tide. Cuda Bite’s face was a mess of dried blood from his theatrically broken nose, and his ward-weave was dark. The spearman had scored more hits on the skulker than Red Tide realized.

“Are you?” she replied.

Cuda Bite switched his dagger into an overhand grip. “I don’t go much left and I pissed myself a little.”

THUNK.

They both turned at the wet, meaty noise of a spear slamming through Salt Wall’s breastplate. One of Most Loyal Spear’s attacks had finally penetrated, sinking deep into the berserker’s chest.

Even stabbed, Salt Wall didn’t go down. She grabbed the chain with one hand and yanked Most Loyal spear toward her. He stumbled forward, surprised by her strength, but deflected her overhand hook attack with his other spear. The haft of his spear found the curve of Salt Wall’s hook and he deftly flicked the weapon off her hand.

Red Tide started forward, but Cuda Bite grabbed her by the arm.

“It’s done,” he said. “You aren’t going to beat that fucker spear-to-spear.”

“I—” Her lips curled back from her teeth. She knew he was right.

“Let him come to us,” Cuda Bite said. “Only chance.”

With Most Loyal Spear in close, Salt Wall tried to wrap her hands around his neck. His forearm shot up, raking his sea-glass fin across the side of her face. The skin of her cheek and jaw hung loose. At last, Salt Wall went down to her knees. Most Loyal Spear yanked his spear free and let her crumple over onto her side.

The leader of the Coralline Elite spun to face the last two champions standing. Red Tide stared back at him, holding her spear in one hand. Next to her, Cuda Bite had gone down to one knee in an attempted to catch his breath.

“You,” Most Loyal Spear said, his eyes on Red Tide. He looped a length of his chain around his upper arm and started toward them, one spear held in front of him, the other dangling. “Was it true, what you said?”

Red Tide lifted her chin. “What part?”

“That you were visited by the gods. That they marked me as a target.” He jabbed his spear toward his own throat with enough force that Red Tide thought he might finish the fight for them, but the point stopped just short of the swollen Ink symbol on his throat. “That my death will grant you power.”

“All true,” Red Tide replied.

Most Loyal Spear snorted and looked around at the bodies littering the beach. “As ever, the gods conspire against us. Look at what you’ve done here, girl.”

“You chased us down,” she said. “Came looking for trouble.”

“The oca’em are going extinct,” Most Loyal Spear continued. “The Reef is weak, the oceans empty. You call yourselves champions, but you murder your brothers and sisters. For what? Neither you

nor that fool boy Throne Gazer know how the queen sacrifices to save our people. You are good for nothing but savagery.”

He’d slowed his approach while haranguing her and it took a mighty effort on Red Tide’s part not to glance down at the sand between them. The sand where—as Most Loyal Spear tangled with Salt Wall—Red Tide had scattered handfuls of coral chunks. Most Loyal Spear needed only to come forward a few more steps and she would have him.

“Yeah, yeah,” she said, licking her teeth. “When the wind picks up, I can smell the queen’s asshole on your breath.”

Most Loyal Spear took a deep breath. “Fine.” His knuckles went white. “Your song will be short, Red Tide. Thrashing, miserable, and forgotten.”

He came toward them. Cuda Bite staggered to his feet, hunkered low, his dagger flashing. Red Tide opened herself and felt the Ink on her chest warm in anticipation. Just a step or two more—

“Stop! He’s mine! Most Loyal Spear is *mine!*”

Throne Gazer had regained consciousness. His face was a mask of crimson dripping down from his head wound. He hobbled closer on his ruined leg, using his trident to steady himself.

“This fucking guy,” Cuda Bite muttered.

Red Tide sensed Most Loyal Spear’s shift, how he moved to the side to keep them all in his sight. He edged away from where they wanted him.

Cuda Bite saw this, too. With a squeak from his ruined nose, he rushed forward to make a sloppy swipe at Most Loyal Spear. The attack was obvious and Most Loyal Spear batted it aside with his plated forearm, countering with a spear thrust that dug into Cuda Bite’s shoulder even as the little

skulker tried to backpedal. He threw himself backward, clutching at Most Loyal Spear's chain, and the Coralline Elite came with him happily, aiming for Cuda Bite's throat with a follow-up strike.

The sand crunched strangely beneath Most Loyal Spear's feet.

Red Tide threw her hands into the air like a conductor.

Spikes of coral lanced upward, hoisting Most Loyal Spear. One shot through his foot, another his thigh, his groin, his belly, his shoulder, the side of his head. He was suspended six feet above them with his limbs spread wide, like a butterfly pinned to a notebook page. The coral glistened pink beneath him, spirals of red slowly trickling downward. His weapon clattered from his hand.

Most Loyal Spear looked down at Red Tide, blinking, the color already leaving his face. His mouth worked, but too much inside him was sliced apart, so he could only form a single word.

"Mistake," he told her. "Mistake."

Red Tide cupped a hand under his neck. The Ink dripped down from his throat, pooling in her palm.

"We'll see," she said quietly.

The Ink slithered up her arm to join the rest of the symbols on her chest. One tendril snaked upward, though, and Red Tide had the mind to snatch at it before she realized the Ink was jumping to Cuda Bite. He was too preoccupied poking at the wound on his shoulder to even notice the Ink land on the back of his neck.

"No!" Throne Gazer arrived, screaming. "I told you he was--!"

Red Tide kicked him between the legs. He went down in a heap, spitting and moaning. She kicked his trident away, in case the rejected heir had any ideas of further violence, but he remained at her feet, curled up and whimpering.

“Yeah,” Cuda Bite said in a response to a question nobody had asked. Red Tide glanced in his direction and saw his eyes had gone faraway.

Your power has grown, Red Tide. The worm’s voice said inside her head. *Do you desire a consultation with the symbologist?*

Before she could answer, Turtle Jaw shouted. “She’s alive!”

During their engagement with Most Loyal Spear, the warden had crawled across the sand to crouch next to Salt Wall. Ignoring the question in her head, Red Tide ran over to join him.

“Shark’s supper...” Red Tide murmured, shaking her head.

In a day full of them, Salt Wall was a truly grisly sight. A good chunk of the woman’s square-shaped face had been cleaved, so that her features were now an asymmetrical mess of gore. Beyond the deep cuts on her arms and legs, there was the hole in her chest, punched there by Most Loyal Spear. Right into her lung, if Red Tide guessed right. And yet, even as Red Tide stared down at her, the wound knit itself a little bit closed. Salt Wall breathed raggedly, and not often, and she stared unseeing up at the sky—but she lived. If you could call it that.

“I have... I have healing,” Turtle Jaw said. He fumbled for the trinkets that Red Tide had seen him stash around his neck. They were charms from a sea witch. Putting things together, Red Tide realized they probably came from Deep Dweller herself. “We need a circle of stones, a fire, and... and...”

Turtle Jaw himself was woozy from blood loss. As he stammered, Red Tide looked to Salt Wall's chest, where the warden had loosened her armor in an attempt to let her breathe. She was looking at the **[Recovery+]** Ink at the moment when it faded.

Salt Wall convulsed. There would be no more patchwork healing. There was no time for stone circles and rituals.

"Symbologist?" Red Tide said aloud.

I hear you, Red Tide.

"Take me now."

--DRAMATIS PERSONAE--

Red Tide, Enchantress of the 4th Renown, The Reef, choosing carefully

Cuda Bite, Skulker of the 2nd Renown, The Reef, not keeping count of his kills

The Symbologist, attendant of the gods, keeper of the symbols, a worm

The surviving champions of The Reef and their Quill, coming together or splitting apart

23 New Summer, 61 AW

The Central Sea, heading north

277 days until the next Granting

This time, the ge'oca did not greet her. There were no grateful leviathans or blessings of the ocean. Red Tide blinked her eyes and she was simply somewhere else.

A cave. The subterranean space was dimly lit by glowing growths of azure moss. The air felt refreshingly cool against Red Tide's skin which, moments ago, had been dappled by sweat and blood. The grinding ache across her ribs faded as did the tightness in her muscles. She let loose a ragged sigh, safe inside this illusion for a few moments at least.

Up ahead, the symbologist waited in his tattered robes, seated behind the same desk as the last time Red Tide met him. The glowing moss stretched across the stone floor in parallel lines creating a path to the creature's desk. On the vast wall behind the symbologist, Red Tide recognized the concentric

circles of symbols for [Enchantress], [Oca'Em], and [Mortal]. Strangely, the layout of the [Skulker] class was also visible. Red Tide cocked her head, trying to take in all the possibilities that the gods would tattoo upon her—she was looking for something in particular.

“My offer to swim south and wash this damn stuff off us still stands,” said a voice to Red Tide’s right.

She hadn’t noticed Cuda Bite sitting on the floor, his bare back pressed against the stone. His knees were pulled up to his chest and the smile he flashed Red Tide was a shaky one.

“You got a line building up back here, worm,” Red Tide called to the symbologist. “Can we get some service?”

“By all means,” the symbologist answered, its voice like crumpling parchment. “I told your colleague this is not a place to linger, but he insisted on waiting for you.”

Red Tide crouched down to get a better look at Cuda Bite. All the injuries they’d sustained at the beach were back with their physical bodies, but he’d brought the haunted expression with him.

“You good?” Red Tide asked.

Cuda Bite shook his head. “That was some nasty work, Red.”

“First time?”

He raised an eyebrow. “First time for what?”

“For killing.”

Cuda Bite snorted. “Now that you mention it, yeah. But it’s not that. Fuck those guys. It was them or us.”

“And that’s how it’s going to stay,” she replied. “Them or us.”

He wagged a finger like she wasn't getting it. "Turtle Jaw's got us in a mess. Bad enough when it was just go to the island and survive for a week. I'm no fighter, but I can run and hide with the best of them. He's got us tied up in some politics now, Red. I didn't sign up to play revolutionary."

"I know."

"The queen's hunting us. We were supposed to have a year to get ready, or at least a year to fall madly in lust and get drunk a lot." Red Tide laughed softly at that, but Cuda Bite kept going. "We're already running for our lives and the Granting hasn't even kicked off."

"I mean to have a word with the warden about all that," Red Tide said evenly.

"Turtle Jaw ain't even pulling the strings, Red! That's Throne Gazer whose nuts you kicked in. His sea witch mother is still floating around somewhere. They got pods of loyal warriors still stewing from the last coup."

"Funny," Red Tide said. "I didn't see any of them coming to help."

"Sure, but what happens when they do show up? You think that pompous asshole wants to work with some outlaws when he could install some of his old bodyguards?"

"He said he respects me," Red Tide said, stroking her chin. "But that he wasn't so sure about you."

"Aw, come on, Red! Fuck me." Cuda Bite rubbed his hands across his face. "I'm going to end up dead as poor Salt Wall."

"Yeah? Well, she's alive."

Cuda Bite peeked through his fingers. "Say what?"

“Oh, she’s dying,” Red Tide clarified. She hooked her thumb in the direction of the symbologist.
“But I mean to do something about that.”

“Shit, Red, why didn’t you say something sooner?”

Red Tide stood up and offered Cuda Bite her hand, lifting him swiftly to his feet. Together, the two of them followed the trail of glowing moss toward the symbologist. The creature lightly drummed dozens of stubby fingers on his desk.

“Ah,” the thing said. “Ready, at last?”

“Where are we, worm, your bedroom?” Red Tide asked. “I thought you lived in Armistice.”

“The catacombs are but another form of the island,” the symbologist said. “I thought the two of you might have had your fill of beaches on this day.”

“Nice of you,” Cuda Bite said. He put his hands on his hips and gazed up at the symbols surrounding the **[Skulker]** rune. “What’ve you got that will keep me alive?”

“Many, many things.”

“And what about healing?” Red Tide asked. She pointed to one of the runes that spun off from **[Hypnotic Object]**. “That my best choice?”

[Healing Song] – *Your song mends the physical body of all who hear it. Must be activated in conjunction with the **[Hypnotic Object]**.*

“I cannot pass judgment on what is best,” the symbologist replied. “However, if your goal is to restore the bodies of your injured fellows, that would suit your purpose.”

Red Tide made a yapping gesture with her hand. “Why are you so scared of giving a straight answer, worm?”

“The gods have not given me capacity for fear.”

“Lucky you,” Cuda Bite said. He shuffled his feet as he eyed the wall of symbols. “You’re going to make me look bad, Red. You come back with the gift of healing for our mutilated friends, and I’m over here trying to pick the best tattoo to keep me alive.”

Red Tide clapped his shoulder. “Alive is good, Cuda Bite. No shame in that.”

“You might find this hard to believe given my impressive stature, but I got kicked around a lot in my younger days,” the lithe skulker said dryly.

“Younger days.” Red Tide sized him up. “How old are you, Cuda Bite?”

“Twenty-one. That’s beside the point. Now, I brought a lot of that treatment on myself. Being a filcher around the Reef and the southern ports, well, you’re going to catch some beatings. But I truly hate it, Red. I truly hate even a scraped knee.”

“You fishing for an apology because we broke your nose?”

“That was a trap well set, I’m not holding a grudge,” Cuda Bite replied, raising his hands. “I’m saying that I hate pain. I’m not like Salt Wall, feeding off every cut and looking to return it double. I’m a jellyfish. And here I am committed to a life of people trying to stab me.”

Dragging her tongue against her top row of teeth, Red Tide reached over to scratch Cuda Bite’s neck. “You saying you’d like to work on your pain tolerance?”

“No! Except, I mean, when you put it like that...”

The symbologist shifted around in its chair, the dry rustling of its natty robes echoing off the cavern walls. “Champions,” the creature intoned, “this visitation is not intended for small talk.”

Cuda Bite scowled at the symbologist, then drew Red Tide's attention to one of the runes in the second ring of **[Skulker]** abilities, this one attached to the symbol for **[Shadow Step]**.

[Dark Reflex] – *When you would suffer a grievous injury, your body will instead vaporize and reconstitute at a safe distance.*

"What do you think of that one, Red?"

"Sounds ideal for a man who don't want to get stabbed," she replied. "Except, what the fuck is vaporize?"

"Like a mist, right?" Cuda Bite looked to the symbologist.

"Like a vapor."

"What's the difference?"

"Primarily density and visibility."

Cuda Bite looked at Red Tide. She shrugged.

"Does that hurt?" he asked. "Vaporizing?"

"Not in this case, no."

"I think that's the one, then."

The symbologist shuffled around in its chair, drawing itself upright. Red Tide hadn't noticed that the creature had, at some point, begun to slouch.

"Have you reached your decisions?" the symbologist asked.

"Yeah," the two said in unison.

"Good," the symbologist replied. "Done."

And just like that, Red Tide was back in her aching body, staring down at Salt Wall's gruesome injuries. Turtle Jaw still knelt beside the wounded berserker, although he'd stopped fumbling with the trinkets tied around his neck and instead peered hopefully up at Red Tide.

"The symbologist?"

She nodded. "I just need my—"

"Harp!"

Red Tide spun around in time to see her instrument arcing through the air toward her, courtesy of Cuda Bite. She caught the harp by its strap and slung it over her shoulder. As her fingers brushed across the strings, Red Tide sensed new power flowing from her Ink. A warm energy gathered inside her, building in her throat and at the tips of her fingers. She needed only to release it.

The blood pouring from Salt Wall's chest wound had slowed and become frighteningly dark. Red Tide understood how little the other woman had left.

Red Tide began to play.

She did not have any particular tune in mind as she started the **[Healing Song]**. The notes came naturally. Red Tide plucked strings that sounded like a beating heart. Her melody felt like a night's restful sleep, like a cool breeze carried in from the ocean. When she opened her mouth to sing, she was surprised at the words that came out--not words at all, actually, more like tones. These sounds belonged to the gods and she let them pour out from her. They exerted change upon the world. They coaxed mending from the bodies of all who could listen.

There was a beauty in this that Red Tide had never encountered before. Her eyes began to water, but she couldn't stop the song to wipe away the tears. She sensed someone standing beside her,

realized it was Turtle Jaw, and felt grateful for the warden's rough thumb against her cheek and his hand against her back.

The process was not a quick one. Red Tide felt herself get lost in the music. She sensed the lightening of pressure at her ribs as her own bruises faded. She caught a glimpse of the gashes across Turtle Jaw's torso, how they narrowed and knitted, and soon became scars. The sun sunk lower in the sky. Her fingertips became raw, her skin burning; she surely would've bled if not for her own healing. Her throat felt chapped, like she'd been screaming.

Red Tide couldn't stop playing. She knew, if she did, that she would not be able to start again. The Ink would've faded.

Salt Wall's injuries were grievous, but Red Tide's music refused to let the berserker die. Slowly, her face slid back into its proper alignment, her cheekbone melting back behind a curtain of new skin. Bones and muscle and finally flesh funneled upward from her chest wound, until at last Salt Wall's breathing turned regular. Her blueish gray skin was still pale, but her eyes finally fluttered open. The berserker stared up at Red Tide in disbelief.

At last, Red Tide let her song end.

Salt Wall sat up tentatively, first touching her face, then poking gingerly at the hole in her armor. "I owe you," she said to Red Tide. "I owe you big."

Red Tide's forearms burned. She felt dizzy.

"Yeah," Red Tide croaked, her voice scratchy. "You can start by carrying me wherever we're going next."

And with that, Red Tide blacked out.

26 New Summer, 61 AW

The Central Sea, heading north

274 days until the next Granting

They hiked north for three days, across rocky lowlands that slowly gave way to sparse forest. This was not an environment familiar or pleasant for the oca'em, but Turtle Jaw knew how to build a fire and where to forage as if he'd researched for this journey, and Salt Wall proved more than capable of fishing the small streams they came across. They were exhausted for those first two days, wrung out from the battle. Red Tide's skin itched as they put the ocean at their backs.

By the third night, Red Tide decided she had waited long enough for answers.

"I need to know if it works," Cuda Bite said, bouncing from foot-to-foot. "Just do it."

Salt Wall had donned her hook. She tapped the sharpened point lightly against the skulker's sternum. "I could hurt you."

"Only if it doesn't work," Cuda Bite replied. "Only if that symbologist thing lied to me."

The two of them stood in a small clearing, a few feet away from the fire. Sitting on an overturned log, Red Tide had turned to watch Cuda Bite test out his new Ink. Across from her, Turtle Jaw and Throne Gazer watched as well. Over the last couple days, she had caught moments of argument between the warden and the trident master. Throne Gazer had nothing to say to the rest of them.

"I accept no responsibility for any pain you suffer," Salt Wall pronounced.

"Wait, wait, I'm having second thou--!"

Salt Wall swung her hook in an upward arc that should've gored through Cuda Bite's abdomen and dug under his ribs. Instead, **[Dark Reflex]** triggered. Cuda Bite's body became like a shadowy fog, the cloud rolling through the space above the fire. The skulker manifested standing behind Throne Gazer, patting his perfectly healthy torso.

"Oh, that's a rush!" Cuda Bite yelled.

Then, he bent down, and snatched Throne Gazer's trident, backpedaling quickly to a safe distance. At the same moment, Salt Wall circled around to stand behind Turtle Jaw.

Sneering, Throne Gazer flinched toward Cuda Bite, but went still as Turtle Jaw put a hand on his shoulder. The warden stared across the fire at Red Tide, a companionable smile on his square face. Red Tide smiled back, all teeth.

"A few questions that will decide how the next few minutes go," Red Tide said.

"Of course," Turtle Jaw responded.

"Where are we going?"

"Besaden."

Red Tide cocked her head. The great forest set aside for the beastlords. They worshipped the ge'besa there, the gods of animal kind, and there were stories that some of them could transform into four-legged creatures. Red Tide wondered if that was true, or if that was like the tales the sailors told about the oca'em.

"What do we want with the beastlords?" she asked.

"An alliance," Turtle Jaw said. "We believe they might be convinced to help us in the Granting."

Red Tide nodded. "And all this is for him?" She jerked her chin toward Throne Gazer. "You meant to put him on the Coralline Throne?"

"No."

She was surprised that it was Throne Gazer who answered. He did not bother drawing himself up or puffing out his chest as he sometimes did when he spoke to them. Throne Gazer instead seemed happy to have some of his braids partly obscuring his face as he stared into the fire.

"My mother, Deep Dweller, she no longer thinks I am suited to be king," he continued. "Not after the calamity of our last coup. She does not feel that I'm suited for leadership."

"Your mother sounds cruel and accurate," Cuda Bite said.

Throne Gazer slowly nodded at the insult, like he couldn't dispute it.

When it became clear that Throne Gazer would say no more, Turtle Jaw picked up the thread. "Deep Dweller believes, and I agree, that our people will die out if forced to live much longer in the queen's choking peace. The Reef needs change but whoever sits the throne cannot do it alone. We need a coalition." He looked at each of them in turn. "A royal blood, a warrior from the cold northern waters, a scrapper from the Reef's lower classes, and an outlaw with a growing legend. These are who the oca'em will look to for inspiration."

"Which one am I?" Cuda Bite asked, smirking. "The legend, right?"

Red Tide shushed him. "What do you mean inspiration?"

"Our people must know that the seas are ours," Turtle Jaw said firmly. "They must remember our glories of times passed."

"And we're meant to do that?" Red Tide asked.

“Yes, you,” Turtle Jaw said. “You and the great leviathans that we wish back into existence.”

The outrider who had been assigned to gather King Mudt's most worthy captains found his first man standing before the walls of Infinzel with his sword belt in the dirt.

For the first time since the siege of the pyramidal city had begun a decade ago, the battlefield was peaceful. The scorched ground between the Orvesian camp and Infinzel's walls was littered with bones and hungry blackbirds. There were fresh corpses there, too. Men who had been killed just that morning. Terrible timing, on their part.

"Captain Sulk," the outrider said. "The king summons you. The parameters of our war have changed."

"Ah. Now he summons me?" Captain Sulk asked without turning. "The king and I were just together, though he was too bloodthirsty to notice."

Sulk had been young and handsome before he'd been moved to the frontlines. Now, his eyes were hollow and his complexion pale, his hair falling out. He'd sent thousands of warriors to crash against the walls of Infinzel. Often, he'd been amongst them. On three occasions Sulk had been buried beneath mountains of corpses that had required days of digging with bare hands through rotten meat and juices to free himself. He had a reputation as a man who simply refused to die.

"I believe my war is over," he said, turning to the outrider. "I am leaving this place."

And the outrider saw that Captain Sulk had not been marked with the blackbird of Orvesis. Instead, on Captain Sulk's neck, there was tattoo of a round shield. Sulk held a quill and inkwell, just like the one the king had carried.

The outrider put a hand on his sword hilt. Sulk raised an eyebrow. Even with the legendary captain already disarmed, the outrider quickly decided not to test the man. He would not arrest Captain

Sulk. The man's bravery across the years had saved nearly as many men as his orders to assail the wall had gotten killed.

"What should I tell the king?" the outrider asked as he stepped aside.

Captain Sulk considered this for a moment. "Tell him that I wish him a bountiful harvest."

--Record of the First Granting and Dawning of the Second Age

Lys Crodd, Scribe of the Dead Kingdom of Orvesis

--DRAMATIS PERSONAE--

Sara Free, Paladin of the 9th Renown, The Ministry of Sulk, back on her own two feet

Tabitha Gentlerain, Quill of Ambergran, having a rough month

Battar Crodd, Death Knight of the 13th Renown and Quill of the Orvesian Witnesses, about to see a

ghost

6 Hazean, 61 AW

The village of Ambergran, North Continent

264 days until the next Granting

The Ministry arrived in Ambergran at sunset, dog-tired and filthy from the road. The oxen they'd purchased in Noyega had revealed themselves to be sick with worms via spraying bouts of diarrhea. One had almost died from dehydration on the road north. The mission had purchased their wagon from the same Noyegan merchant, so it was little surprise that one of the axles had broken once they'd gone too far to turn back for a refund. At that point, the mission had wasted a half-day double-checking the rest of the supplies they'd purchased to make sure there weren't any further swindles. Repairs were made, healing of beasts conducted, and purifications undertaken.

Sara Free should've known better. People in the coastal cities had an ugly habit of trying to rip off the Ministry when they passed through. The cities had worthy champions and quills with goals. They fought for wishes every year, not a boring but bountiful harvest. Because of that, the city-folk thought themselves above the protection of Sulk's Few, and thus felt entitled to extract some other value from the Ministry. Sara was in command of this mission, so it was down to her to make sure their coin was well spent. Under normal circumstances, she would've more thoroughly shopped around, or chosen a different port from Noyega entirely. But she was in a hurry.

There was a man in Ambergran who had hacked her leg off. Sara was eager to show him that she still stood.

The High Minister would not appreciate that thought. It has taken two days of rituals to fully restore Sara's leg. She'd been sedated through most of it, but when she awoke her hair smelled of pig's blood, burnt wood, and mage sweat. Sara recovered within the artificially cooled walls of the Ministry's hospital with only an unconscious Gadgeteer who'd suffered head-to-toe burns for company. She gritted her teeth against the wrenching tautness of new muscle bonding with bone.

"A costly procedure," High Minister Denavon Brunner had said when he came to visit.

The High Minister and Quill of Sulk was a balding man in his fifties who seemed to do everything slowly. Like most of the Ministry, he'd been born with a different loyalty. Brunner had been a gambler in his younger years, his affectless face and unhurried style giving him a natural advantage in cards. He'd been driven to join the Ministry after witnessing the horrific treatment of Noyega's debtors. His election as High Minister was no doubt due to the same cool disposition that made him such a terror at the tables.

"I'll repay it," Sara had told him.

"I suspect you and I have different notions of how that might be accomplished," Brunner replied. He paused for a moment, to let Sara think about that. "I am sending you to Ambergran."

Sara's face lit up, but she kept her voice steady. "As you wish, Umbo."

"This is not a mission of vengeance," Brunner said.

"Of course not. I have my leg back. No hard feelings for the bastard who cut it off."

Brunner studied her. Sara flexed her knee joint under the covers. "You lost a sword fight. The people of Ambergran lost half their village."

"Would have been more," Sara said quietly. "I killed one of those Witnesses myself, before I fell."

"I would not expect gratitude." Sara looked away. After a few long seconds, Brunner continued. "This is not a mission of vengeance," he repeated. "It is a mission of forgiveness and healing. You failed these people. Now you must face them."

Weeks later, sitting straight in her saddle as the mission clattered along Ambergran's main road, Sara wondered if there would be anyone here to accept her apology. The farmland had been quiet

coming in. She'd seen lifeless farmhouses and razed fields, half-demolished buildings, and disintegrating laundry still swinging from lines. But she hadn't seen any people. Rumors said the Orvesians had taken up full residence here, but outside of a few black feathered tents on the outskirts, Sara saw no sign of them either.

“We may have bought too much dried meat, Umbo Sara,” said Murph Carter from his seat atop their rickety wagon.

Sara shook her head, then pointed to fresh footprints in the dirt road ahead. “Someone still lingers, Umbo Murph.”

“I hope they’re hungry.”

Including Murph, there were eight other people in Sara's mission. Two healers, a mason, a carpenter, a pair of unskilled laborers, an archivist, and a chef. They were all Umbo – there was no other rank within The Ministry of Sulk. Only the High Minister was given a special title, mostly as a way to display authority to outsiders, and although Brunner had occupied the role for as long as Sara had been a member, he could be put aside by a simple majority vote. Sara was a champion and had been appointed to command of this mission for the sake of logistics, but the men and women alongside her were equals, not subordinates.

And anyway, she suspected the people of Ambergran would have more use for a healer like Murph than a paladin like Sara. She only got to showcase her skills once a year. The rest of the Ministry, with their supplies and knowledge for a devastated people, they were useful all year round.

The mission followed the dirt road into Ambergran's ramshackle town center and there found the first signs of life. The day was fading, but someone had seen fit to light torches outside the meeting hall. The faint hum of many voices was audible within, though the building's double doors were closed.

An indistinct, huddled shape sat next to the doors, as if standing guard or eavesdropping through the window.

There were carts lined up throughout the village square. Some contained piles of lumber, sawed to size and ready to be installed. Others contained bundles of wheat, freshly harvested and ready for transport.

“Looks as if the town is already getting back on its feet,” Murph said. “We might not be needed here at all.”

Sara eyed the meeting hall. “We are needed. If Ambergran's been offered a helping hand, it's one soaked in the town's own blood. I intend to wipe this place clean.”

“Brunner asked me to scold you for talk like that.”

Up ahead, a man rolled out from beneath one of the wheat wagons where he'd been tightening the fasteners on a wheel. He started at the sight of the mission, his jaw slackening further as he stared at Sara.

“Crucifalian,” he whispered.

“No,” Sara replied. “Ministry of Sulk.”

The man shook his head like he didn't believe her. He set about a series of pointless gestures—smoothing down his greasy hair, wiping dirt from the front of his pants. Sara stared back at him coldly, ignoring the snickering from the rest of her mission.

“I heard the stories, but never seen one of you in the flesh,” the farmhand said. “The flesh...”

“Umbo Sara,” said Murph in a stage whisper, “perhaps you could go shit behind a tree for this man. Your sounds disabused most of your present traveling companions of any poetical notions.”

More laughter from her mission. Sara forced herself to smile. She knew what effect that might have on the leering farmhand.

Even after days on the road, a broadsword strapped to her back, wearing shapeless plate armor and dung-caked boots, Sara Free was beautiful. She was tall, with a regal neck, and perfect bone structure. Her hair was wavy, blonde in a way that somehow invoked morning sunlight, her skin perfect, ears and nose meticulously proportioned, lips suggestively full and pink, her eyes like chips of emerald. Sara Free was artwork, breathtaking in her impossibility.

All the women of Crucifalia had been wished this way by their husbands. Sara's beauty had not diminished when she'd lost her loyalty for her homeland.

"Where is everyone?" she asked the gawping farmhand. Sara was used to being ogled. She was long past the point of lashing out during these incidents; she had outgrown trying to temper her physical beauty with verbal ugliness. The initial awe would wear off eventually, as it had with her friends in the Ministry. It always did.

"Witnessing," the man said, gesturing toward the meeting hall even as his eyes roamed across Sara's armor.

"Not you?"

The man made to spit in the dirt, but remembered his manners. "I haven't forgotten what those bastards did to us. I'll let them do the work in the dead's fields and I'll pocket coin from their labors, but I'd sooner gouge out my eyes than listen to their sermons."

"Good man," Sara said.

He positively quivered. "You mean it?"

She left it at that with the farmhand, turning instead to Murph and the others.

“Set up over there, by the bulletin board,” she said. “I am going to announce our presence.”

Murph raised an eyebrow. “Is that a good idea, Umbo Sara?”

She flashed him a smile and saw the way he swallowed at her perfect rows of white teeth.

Perhaps her looks hadn't worn off entirely. “I've come too far not to say hello.”

Sara dismounted and tossed Murph her reins. As she started toward the meeting hall, the farmhand reached out to touch her arm. Without a thought, she activated **[Radiate]** and the man jerked back his hand as sudden heat rolled off her plated shoulders. She was of the Ministry and thus believed in charity and protection of the weak, but she would not be touched without permission.

The hunched body by the doors of the meeting hall stirred as Sara approached. The thing turned out to be a woman, albeit one who looked like she'd been living in a tree for a month. At first, Sara thought she wore the ash stripes of an Orvesian, but on closer inspection that turned out to be just old-fashioned mud.

The woman turned her face up to look at Sara, and the paladin stopped short.

"I know you," Sara said.

Tabitha Gentlerain quickly looked away. Her reddish hair was caked with mud and she stunk like she'd been without a bath for weeks.

"I have seen the power of the gods, and it is terrible," Tabitha mumbled.