

ALIUM

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SAMPLE

he poison sea billowed in a great fabric. Winds out-shook the waves as bedclothes, unfolding while they fell. Low through their collapsing lace swept gulls like shining needles, drawing the robes of the world together on gossamer threads departing. Yet even stitches so fine burst as they were sewn, new shapes swelling in relief against an always different tapestry of ocean.

Only meters below the surface, but for a distant rumble, the dimensionless vault of open water was a vast cosmos of ageless silence. So gradual were the transitions between its many colours that the eye moving deeper could not know where one gave to another. Rich purple layered with magenta filtered into turquoise, now indigo chasms opening on solid navy firmament. Here there was little light or motion at all, yet still more nameless shades mingled into featureless abyss.

Save the dark green pillars of seaweed, life was scarce and subtle in the deep. But here, all alone, was a dweller not so native, and easily spotted. Just above those titanic listing stalks this curious object drifted out of place. It was no rocky fish, nor even a great sunken log, though it looked as much. Here was a young ogre called Ogwold, far from his home on the shore.

Long roots of hair wreathed his rocky shoulders in knotted black. Grey skin reflected the remote light no brighter than along the chiselled hook of his nose. Yet upon the stone slabs of his eyelids played only darkness. They were shut, black overhung caves in a craggy brow. Ogwold was lost in that activity which brought him the greatest joy in life, an emergent property of these deep waters,

far from the land, his people, his work. He was dreaming.

Or so he had been. Groaning doors of rock lifted; pale grey eyes flickered out into the open. Balling up, now stretching his bony toes, the ogre flung back his head, twisted his bulky trunk, and wrung the sleep from his cracking bones—a stone statue crumbling to life. Even in this stiff state, his movements through the water were true and natural. He was unnaturally quick and slender for his kind. Flat feet locked together, powerful legs whipped the water in terrific bursts. Apish arms streamlined, blocky shoulders tight to his ears, three thunderous kicks might bear him any distance. On such inertia he soared, rotating slowly, reflecting on his reverie.

Ogwold loved dreams as much for their going as their coming. He found the empty spaces between waves beautiful as their cresting boundaries, and loved the sea dearly for this reason. It seemed here that all things drifted through the bottomless deep like schools of fish shimmering against a changeless, infinite substrate. This medium—to him—was consciousness, equal in beauty with any thought, however grand, to emerge thereof and carry out its life.

He was quite alone, however, in his affection. His people, the Nogofod, despised the sea in every way: its turbulent voice, corrosive touch, the purple-sick taint of the sluggish, humped surf-fingers ever groping the beach, sucking steaming insectoid corpses from beneath the sand. Many were the terrifying tales of that ocean. Shunned were those said to linger near to it; awful disfigurement would plague their offspring. Whatever the stories said, this ogre had not suffered the slightest impairment.

When he was little, Ogwold had leaned curiously from the edge of an ancient stone dock. Insatiable even atop this feature—jutting far out into the slurping water—his knees slipped, and hands out-flung to break the fall met no resistance. The sudden silence which enveloped him beneath the surface became his fondest memory. His father Ogdof lumbering, then rushing from the deck of a docked ship had pulled him desperately out of the water. But his son was unchanged, grinning rather with the welcoming touch of the sea, the plunge into something grander, while his rescuer's arms smoked and blistered.

Returning in the secrecy of dusk—lowering his huge face into the surf—Ogwold found no difficulty breathing underwater. Rather than dissolve, his stony jowls trembled with new vigour. His big heart swelling with the undertow pulled him into the cool waves diving. Lanky arms parted and drew back the water naturally for the first time. Legs bound together kicked as in a tail effortlessly realized. Gravity was lost with the known world. Somewhere in his rocky spine nameless cores long unnoticed began to stir. Ogwold was at peace.

Each day, when the last galleon had been loaded, when the traders had departed in their cracked wagons back up into the heavy-shouldered hills, when

the last ogres, hunched with sweat, gathered to smoke their pipes in musty salt-rotted cabins, Ogwold lurched stealthily down the bare shore by a secret inlet, far from the village. He would walk out slowly into those purple folds which clothed him not in capture but embrace, drew him out into the swaddling open ocean when none could know to spiral over the kelp canopy and dream of places long hidden from such folk as the Nogofod.

Ogwold slowed gradually in his swimming. That time came, aestheticize as he might the beauty of absence, when he wished for inspiration. Letting his limbs drift apart, he lowered his gaze into the depths for some new cue. The stunning complexity of the kelp canopy always inspired his greatest visions. But lately he wondered if such reveries were merely the echoes of a secret more wonderful, obscured beneath the inmost forest.

If the sea were a great garment, the land was its wearer, and somewhere within must persist its vital organs. Ogwold had weaved dreams from such clothing many times, but never had he dared to seek flesh. Now, coasting on the world's swelling pulse, he envisioned a booming heart nestled in the ocean floor, ribbed in the leviathan kelp. There was no throb, though, or sound at all, or warmth, save the pumping in his ears. Still, there needn't be a real organ in the dark. All he desired was a possibility, a germ for the mind. With a kick he streamed down into the forest. Dark blue water filtered into black.

Upon the monolithic kelp stalks phantasmagoric slime moulds clung, ever morphing in hue and shape. In their sickly glow other creatures were revealed. Globular organisms squeezed the water between their many tentacles, floating slowly thereafter as in contemplation. Scuttling, translucent feather-dusters twirled in place. Tiny mushrooms dragged lazy tendrils through the black water, but they seemed agenda-bound, one snaring in its evil hairs a new creature—misshapen, bug-eyed, covered in whips—which seized horribly, shuddered, and was drawn into the undulating maw of its capturer.

In contrast to these motions flowed varicoloured streams of particles, wherein Ogwold discovered a greater majesty still. Tiny bioluminescent histories fizzled in furious prismatic currents, generations sparking and searing, now quiet and still, at once clamorous and vain. He felt in his mind a soft chattering, some ancient language spoken beyond the threshold of consciousness.

Ogwold wondered if even these relationships were a foreground to some greater mystery, the source of sea life itself. The sound even—or was a dream beginning—of an immense, thudding heart vibrated in his skull. To behold it, he dove further into growing darkness. The luminous slime moulds thinned with depth. Now only pale violet striations shed soft, grainy light, and with time even these strains faded. For a long while there was only black void, pure and empty.

Endless were all directions. The young ogre could envision his own body only through each slow, forceful kick.

At last there appeared distant, bright points, like stars on a moonless night. Yet in their light, as he drew nearer, no abyssal world-heart was revealed. Instead, these star-points became the brilliant apices of colossal spires, the dizziest reaches of a many-towered, crystal city, swathed in a light all its own. Entwined were its many structures with shimmering, argent avenues, where a strange and silent people streamed about its emerald industry. They were like in countenance to the Novare men and women Ogwold knew well, the traders, the Lords and Ladies, the Knights, with flowing hair and noble features, that race which ruled over his kind—yet, they were different.

Long green, blue, opalescent manes rushed behind smooth bodies shining in cold-jewelled mail. Upon lambent skin, mingling with the sea-shadows, there gleamed in chance ripples coruscating layers of scales, some blue, others green, nacreous, violet. It seemed that each entity showed forth an underlying hue all its own. Most dazzling of all were the long, iridescent membranes spilling from their shoulders. They were like wings whose long, bony structures—spanned with voluminous chutes of webbing—worked the water as strong fins.

One gaunt woman of long jade hair landed, crouching in elegant gargoyle vigilance atop a lone steeple set apart. Great wings glorying in her wake, now shaken, drawn tight to the body, she turned her head up and away from the city, and looked to high-hovering Ogwold with radiant white eyes. But there was something else.

A subtle tremor connected the waters of dream and reality. The dazzling city foundered in a surging bright glare white as the woman's eyes, suddenly retreating into black. Darkness as behind closed eyelids swelled crushing and total. There was an unnatural silence in the sea. Perhaps it had wrinkled in the back of Ogwold's mind, turned overmuch upon the dream, but now an unmistakable shadow menaced upon his senses.

He opened his eyes slowly, turning upwards. Here was a true native of the abyss. High above in the distant slime-light of the kelp trunks, a great diamond head filtered out of the shadows, each of its dull scales a boulder. One sunken eye from the side of the skull plastered Ogwold in a sick, yellow desire. Attached was an endless serpent, thick as the immense trees around which wound each coil into unseeable shadow, and perhaps as long. Here in the darkest fathoms of the kelp were not magical cities but unknowable, ancient monstrosities. Feeling all too well understood, he thought even he could smell the exhaust of numberless dead carrying forth on the water, as if a storm of lost souls went with the serpent always.

It seemed suddenly that the forest and sea retreated beyond the creature. The

yellow eye-globe vanished. All kelp between it and the ogre were blown asunder. High above, a patch of pure open ocean became visible, so rent aside were the sea plants up to the very canopy. Out of this strange, brief peace Ogwold in a frenzy kicked out his legs like stout whips to escape. Water and seaweed around him were consumed. Cavernous jaws—all but detectable in their massive breadth—closed upon his arm. Scaly lips froze his neck and ribs. There was an awful severance. Dark blood plumed.

Blinded and wracked with adrenaline, Ogwold completed the kicking motion and spiralled into the shadows of the kelp—now swaying massively back into position—while the beast, having ripped tearing away, now chewed, bones crunching mutedly through the water. The great vacant eye staring at nothing.

In the blood-choked darkness came the pain, like viscous molten metal even in the bone-chilling water, slugging through the veins. Each heartbeat stoked the fire. The sea narrowed into one suffocating black point as the bitter heat grew in searing reality. The raging river of blood gushing from his shoulder socket left behind arid channels in the soul, glaring visions of enormous white and sterile deserts, everything dry and dead. Dreams were impossible. There was only the uncompromising sterility of heat and death.

Then the faintest touch of cool water licked the ogre's undermind. Ogwold was beneath the sea, cradled in the bedclothes of that place where he was most free. A chorus of voices sang for valour and life, calling up from the silver towers, from the shining streets. These were unmistakably the spirits of the sea people far below. Were they dreamt or not? Was this monster, this wound as real? Ogwold would escape with his life regardless. A rage to persist bubbled and broke, a geyser in his heart flooding the oppressive deserts of death with new life.

He set his jaw, squatted against the broad trunk of the stalk to which he clung, black blood globing him, coursing away in webs, and erupted towards the shore—toes pointed, left hand pressed firmly over empty shoulder, lower body scourging the water. The swiftest silver fish were left in his wake as he built speed with enormous thrusts. Beginning in his stomach, rolling through the hips, thighs, whipping with loose ankles, his broad feet carried each dire impulse from the heart, catching and flinging the water like great stone paddles.

From the still, dark deeps below then came a sweet, bodiless voice: "Cease your animal swimming, and fly!"

At once Ogwold felt them. He was familiar with the notion of these secret cores, like joints that he could never quite crack. Now like ribs unclasping the lungs and heart, they unspooled from his vertebrae. Loose, elastic skin, at first slowly, sluggishly poured into the water, dazed then alerted. Great membranous chutes exploded from beneath his shoulder blades, catching the smooth current. Yet now the shocked organs breathed, meeting water as wings the sky.

Exhausting their tremendous volumes they flattened into thin, tough fins, and Ogwold flew.

The shadow of the beast melded with the inky deeps between the kelp trees. Ogwold looked everywhere for the source of the voice, but he was alone, rushing through darkness. The fins extending from his spine worked it seemed of their own accord, and expertly. But when he willed that they strain harder still, their motions became more deep and grand, and his speed was increased. Nevertheless, his blood, winding through the forest, led the way. Even now the great serpent closed, its vast nostril-slits filled with the smoky liquid, the once sluggish eye, now calm and alert as if woken from a long, tedious sleep.

The pain in Ogwold's shredded shoulder shrieked and groaned, his bones trembling. He was all but drowned in the noxious stench of death. Now came the horrible double-edge of an active imagination—or was it as real as his wing-fins, as the voice which called them forth, as silver cities—for he heard even the thousandfold wailing of souls damned to haunt the stinking maw which now yawned behind him.

Suddenly, his waist was encircled in gentleness unbreakable as it was graceful.

Green-blue tapestries unfurled above and angled like slicing blades, filled like mighty sails. Off he shot now by no thought of his own, and it seemed that the monster struggled to follow. Its retreating eye grew awesomely desperate for so small an object of prey. Ogwold's fledgling fins retracted sleepily into the spine once more, capped with bone as the pain consumed him. The wound was too much, the loss of blood too great, and dry darkness—visions of expansive nighted deserts rising from beneath the sea—choked his throat and eyes.

The last he saw was a high blue cheek, long green hair, one brilliant white eye trained on the horizon, and lips, moving it seemed, communicating some secret knowledge, he felt, drifting off, of great importance.

Ogwold awoke beached under the early evening sky. Deep pain hollowed his shoulder, but no blood muddied the surf sucking at his back. Groaning and rolling like a boulder onto his side, he reluctantly inspected the limbless stump which was his right shoulder. The mangled mound was bound tightly in what appeared to be seaweed. Just seeing this makeshift bandage, the pain dulled, and he was able to sit up and inspect it more closely.

The sheen of it was strangely iridescent, and it was far too solid—he noticed, rapping upon the plant-matter with his big knuckles—to be a gauze of kelp. Now he saw, gawking, that strong, gnarled roots wrapped around his shoulder and neck, holding the bandage firmly in place. Following these his hand discovered where thick cords split into countless veins and plunged deep into the flesh of his back and ribs. There they pulsed, tugged, gulped as in feeding. It was

impossible to know how far into the body they wormed.

But this powerful digging, this metal-hard, grasping foreign vegetation so tenaciously invasive did not weaken him at all. Rather, bone-deep, it lifted and supported him. With every powerful squeeze the plant imbued only greater vigour into its host. Ogwold might have stood right up were it not that the swelling and pumping of the thing suddenly reminded him of the storm of blood having escaped him in the first place. The thought so deathlike made him dizzy and hot; slab-like he thumped back onto the cold sand.

Once before he had seen a Nogofod man's leg hacked away in many sloppy axe-strokes. Such were the favoured punishments of Lucetalian knights wasting away on this desolate shore: disabling those whose livelihoods depend upon the integrity of their bodies. The blood, which had burbled and flowed dark and viscous at first, suddenly gushed—when the thigh-bone at last split—in bright liquid torrents. The ogre died before Gurgof could cauterize the wound, let alone bandage it.

Ogwold's stomach felt unnaturally airy at the memory. But more troubling was the notion that, even had the poor ogre survived, he would not have found work. Ogwold still had his legs, but a one-armed Nogofod would scarce find the trust of a trader. To be a greater burden on his father, first as a blaspheming sealofer, and now a cripple, a lowly dufwod, as the Nogofod call the useless, weighed most heavily of all.

The cold, ripping wind drank the seawater from his skin. He sat up once more on his left arm and, turning his head from the shore, looked over the rocky foothills, rising in the distance as they interlaced and built their bulks up into the full features of the Mardes, the mighty mountain range ensconcing the beach and stony desert. So far as Ogwold knew, it went on forever. Higher still, above the dizziest peaks, he beheld the tallest mountain of all, which rose sharp and featureless, encircled, then vanishing in an immortal canopy of gloom.

It was Zenidow, the Place Without Peak. Nowhere in the vapour always surrounding it could the eye detect some termination of its height. Altogether different from the other mountains, it shone always, even upon a moonless night, an immense argent gemstone fitted into the crust of the world, as if some great chunk of heavenly citadel had fallen to the realm of mortals, making everything around it seem all the less glorious. The setting sun sweltered beyond, a bloody hemisphere partly eclipsed by the great mountain, its corona spraying fiery filigree. Ogwold sat long watching the light recede, streams of flame slowly thinning into dusk.

Behind him, over the sea, the first moons began to show their different faces. Tonight it was Somnam and Vitalem that appeared. The first was Ogwold's personal favourite, for it was known as the Vault of Dreams. It was just

beginning to wane in its phase, but he could only tell as it was early in the evening, and a fading touch of sun still painted the firmament. Enormous and gibbous as it was, the dim navy complexion of Somnam would soon be nearly indistinguishable from the full darkness of night. Vitalem was the Heart of Growth, jonquil lord over that which is becoming. Far smaller and blindingly bright in transit across the vast, dull face of the other, it was an orb of pure yellow light.

Rising, Ogwold tracked down and donned his rough, aged tunic, striding reluctantly homeward now along the surf, sea foam sloshing between his toes. Dragging his huge feet through the springy sand, he thought less of dreams and magic. Deep water was the place for such things. Now the cold air of his Nogofod truth stripped away all moisture. Every loafing step towards his village was a step towards dry reason and law. Thoughts of luck and survival were supplanted with uncompromising shame. He had thrown away his precious fitness in a place long forbidden. Now he would not be able to work. His father would take on extra loads. The other Nogofod would sigh like sliding gravel and shake their great manes resignedly.

As images of disapproving elders orbited Ogwold trudging, far along the rocky sand up-rose the leaning shacks of Epherem. The Nogofod settlement studded the beach along and away from the water beside a row of ancient stone docks. Three tall galleons from Lucetal—the royal city across the sea—rocked in the slapping tide. In the morning, the traders from Occultash would arrive with their bursting carts, and the ogres would begin their long-designated task, loading everything aboard.

In the beginning, the Nogofod were something like the Novare. Tens of thousands of years under the yoke of Lucetal had made them culturally subservient. Due to the physical nature of their work and the radiation of the omnipresent, mutant sea, their figures had become hulking and grey, their arms long ropes of muscle, their hair invariably black and impossible to maintain, and their legs far too stout to be called Novare. Eternally hunched, these immense, benign shapes roamed the shore with jarring footfalls, the smallest adult five times the mass of the largest Novare man. Those knights of Lucetal who kept them from leaving the coast had grown to loathe their image, calling them ogres. None knew whether the class or vocation came first.

On the outskirts of Epherem was Ogdof's cabin, Ogwold's home, constructed of dark tutum logs, with an angled, thatched roof, a cracked, stone chimney, and one arched window enshrining the sea. Even thirty strides from the place, Ogwold could smell the potent fumes of the normgrass, Lucetal's gift to ogres. Embedded long ago in the rocky ground, the hardy, invasive weed grew now in

shaggy profusion all down the coast. Most densely it choked the tutum groves, yet some tough though less potent strains survived even in the hilly upland, and it was said that the norm had adapted to and populated even the northern deserts.

Dark green, hung with sap, norm stank powerfully of the sea. While the Nogofod had among them a great love for this dank stench, only Ogwold's nose could perceive that the taint of the purple water was its chief ingredient. He imagined that all the gnarled tufts and dense patches twined their roots beneath the crust, and in a bundled nerve led to the ocean, the source of their power over the mind. It was this dream more than any which had tempted him to smoke in the past. But even if Nogofod minds could be changed, he would not spoil the tranquility of his kind. If the sea was most hated by ogres, norm was most loved.

For his many idiosyncrasies, Ogwold's father was a typical ogre when it came to the norm. He smoked always after the day's work in traditional Nogofod fashion. Milky tongues of stinking vapour eked from beneath the cabin-door, crawling curiously about its frame. Pulling open the salt-rotted wooden plane, Ogwold quickened them into a white cloud.

"Dad," he said, stepping through the veil of smoke, rocky shoulder replaced by hanging head, preparing for the worst. "I've lost an arm." He turned, saying this, to reveal the bandaged wound.

Ogdof was seated by the hearth with a long wooden pipe, carefully carved and seasoned over many years. He was large even for his kind, with dark-grey skin and the long, sharp nose of his son. A jet black, knotted beard spilled into his lap, though his great, scarred head was completely bald. Ogdof was normally one whose heavy eyelids masked all emotion, but they rose right up at the sight of Ogwold's bandage, metallic irises catching the firelight, and a half-eaten tutum skin fell softly from his free hand, brushing the wooden floor dryly.

Ogwold stood in the door silently. He might have looked brooding if the wind didn't blow the hair out of his anxious eyes. His father rose, lumbered over and hugged him tightly. At last he stepped away, shaggy arms folded, inscrutable woolly eyebrows bearing down. "You were in the water."

"Yes, but..." Ogwold struggled to look forward, ground his teeth. "I was attacked! By a monster that could have swallowed a Euphran!"

The old furrows in Ogdof's face darkened to their full depth. "The water has eroded your flesh and bone. You might have lost your life." He sighed, turning to the window.

"About the threat to my life you're not wrong," said Ogwold, recalling the serpent's awful yellow eye. "But I promise this was not the work of water itself. I was very far out, and deeper than I've ever been. The creature came upon me out of ancient waters." His left hand found and gripped the shoulder-stump as he

spoke, as if seeking comfort there. “It was an awesome thing really... Dad, there are many creatures which call that place their home. Like me, they prosper in the water... Just as there are—as you say—monsters in the desert and the high mountains, I should have known that the ocean has its predators.”

Ogdof had returned to his seat, and now took up his pipe. Though his eyes were still shaded, it seemed by the tilt of his great head that he weighed his son’s words carefully. “You seem hearty for one to suffer such a tale. And there is no blood anywhere I can see.” He sipped on the piece for a moment, and white smoke curled from his nostrils. “What is this bandage? I’ve never seen Gurgof use such material.”

Ogwold winced. If speaking about sea monsters was strange, he now risked seeming completely mad. Loosening his grip upon the shoulder-dressing, he engendered his breath to come evenly. “I woke up on the beach with my wound already bound,” he began. “I wouldn’t have escaped but for the help of another. There was a woman in the water. She saved me.” Ogwold pulled his tunic back, revealing the pulsing roots that dug into his flesh. For the insanity of his son’s words, and the alien nature of the bandage, Ogdof seemed strangely aloof. Though the other was partly relieved by this, for inexplicable things were adamantly shunned in Epherem, he sensed that something was deeply amiss with his father. “I doubt we’d have an easy time removing it,” he laughed, trailing off.

But Ogdof’s silence continued. His weighty eyelids closed in thought, disclosing nothing. White tendrils of smoke coiled about his arms, snaking along the floor as he rocked, listening to the crashing waves. He looked out through the window over the dark sea beneath the twilit sky blossoming with white flowers. Noting the fullness of bright Vitalem in the growing darkness, he thought of a time before Ogwold had come into the world, when these old boards were younger and stronger, when this chair didn’t creak so much. He had built the immense seat himself, and it was a fine thing. It was a modest, one-room home that they lived in, with two ancient, yellowed pads along the far wall for sleeping, an expertly crafted table and set of chairs, also his own work, and a wide crate laden with dried tutum fruit. Long before Ogwold was born had the old ogre lived here by the sea.

“I am sorry for going to the water,” Ogwold broke the silence. “The call of it is ceaseless. When I am there... everything makes sense. But I wish no shame on us. I won’t go back. I’ll work hard.” He balled up his left fist like a lumpy stone. “I can still help the traders with this arm; it’s the stronger anyways.”

Ogdof at last set his coveted pipe aside, folded his hands. The deep furrows in his forehead, and about his oft-tightened lips, now soft and full, seemed to melt and vanish. A great tension was released, and his eyebrows rose, suddenly lighter. He began to speak, not looking at his son but gazing out the window into the

great endless roar of the sea.

“When I was very young, I too was transfixed with the ocean.” One of his gnarled hands made, reflexively, to reclaim the pipe, but he stopped, held it wavering there, and returned it to his lap. “I liked to watch the waves.” His lips quivered and he closed his great grey eyes. “One day, she sought me out. She understood my curious heart, she said. She was interested in what I might have to say about the land. We spoke. For what little time she could we walked upon the sand together. We fell in love. For many seasons she was my reason.”

He looked up at Ogwold and there was a warmth in his old grey eyes. “Where she is pure, you are partial. Ogwold, the sea people are your ancestors.” He returned his gaze to the window, as if it had been difficult to look so honestly into a face he had deceived. “The stories about them are accurate for the most part, though they fall short in telling of their beauty. In my time, I’ve learned that most stories are, in fact, somewhat true.”

Ogdof was so shocked he forgot entirely about his missing arm. His mouth moved aimlessly, unable to form words. Ogdof went on, for it was all coming to the surface now. “Partly I believed that you could resist the ocean. Though, she told me this would never hold. Fear—I thought—was enough. But I knew you were in love, natural as anything. I forbade it all the same, and that was cruel.” With this word he forced himself to look back and into Ogwold’s eyes. “I promised to reveal the truth of your blood if I found you again in the water. And yet, I know you’ve been going there for years. I cannot hold you back, Ogwold. Your mother’s name was Autlos-lo. She was born of the poison sea.”

The waves crashed, rocking-chair creaked, fire crackled. Ogdof’s pipe went unnoticed.

At last Ogwold spoke. “The poison is not poison for me.”

Ogdof stroked the deep scars that striated his old arms, where the seawater had scorched him to the bone. “To hide such a thing from you was of course impossible. And you are quite lean for a Nogofod. The bones in your face, too, and your shoulder blades resemble that of the Flosleao.”

“Flosleao. What a pretty thing... Where is she now?”

“I do not know. She was an ancient being, and may have passed. The last I knew of her was in finding you, wrapped in seaweed on this very doorstep. It was stark night when she came to deliver you; somehow I knew you were there. That morning I knew she had gone. I always felt she would return for you.” Ogdof’s old cheeks were drawn into a rare smile. “She was a loving woman, and cared deeply for the life growing within her. She trusted me to raise you well and care for you always.”

“And you have, Dad.” Ogwold turned to the window too now, and looked out into the gleaming face of Vitalem riding along the water. “I am sure that it

was Autlos-lo who saved me. But... I think she wanted me to leave the sea behind. I'll not be saved again."

"You may swim, Ogwold. I will not stop you any longer. I only ask that you not allow the sight of it to any of our kind. We are simple people, as you well know; many will not understand." The pipe had found its way back into Ogdof's callused hands. Already he was packing fresh norm into the bowl with his chipped thumbnail.

"You are ashamed of me."

"I am not! But I wish to have peace here." He struck a match. "This is my homeland, and yours. We will be ostracized by this knowledge..." Ogdof took a long, satisfying pull from the stem. The next words fell out of his mouth in a cataract of hoarse smoke. "And there is no place for a Nogofod thrown out than to stick upon the spears of Novare." He fell at the word 'Novare' into a fit of deep, throaty coughs.

Ogwold went and sat beside his father at the hearth. The anxiety seemed to have melted from his features; he moved across the room slowly and surely. "I will not return to the sea. You are as much my blood as Autlos-lo, who is gone. I love you Dad," he said softly, looking into the fire. "I will live like the Nogofod from now on, though with one arm I will surely be a burden on you." He looked up into Ogdof's face expecting worry but finding only a simple kindness. Ogdof clapped one hand onto his son's massive thigh and sighed.

The warmth of the fire bathed Ogwold and seemed to dry the moisture from his eyes. As ever, the roar of the sea called to him through the window. Like music did the cool sound of the surf fill his ears, taking shape, forming words, and he recalled there looking at his beaming father the face of his mother, her softly moving lips, the song which she sang to him both carefully and urgently while she pulled him from the deathly sea. Now her words came clearly upon the waves in solemn salutation:

*Back upon this cradle resolve never
To release your heart. Fix instead fated
Vision—above all things—on Zenidow
Yet higher still. Dive, swim rather in the
Seas of night above immortal; dream with,
Know rather the spaces between the stars.*

*Take this elder of the sea, and through it
Drink the other waters of the world. Love
And light it needs in teaching you to speak.
Deep into the blood and bones now reach its*

*Careful roots, and always hereon will you
Have in common the memory of peace.*

*At the peak of the peakless find kinship
With godly things in plain sight incarnate.*

Ogwold sat in the chair beside his father, and gazed into the fire, massaging the strange plant which seemed now altogether friendly, nestled in his destroyed shoulder. It was a gift, he was certain, of far greater magnitude than he could know. A gift, and the beginning of a quest. To Zenidow, he thought, the greatest mountain in the land. She would have me go to Zenidow.

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