

# TAMARETH

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KENNEDY, BRIAN



THE OLD MAN was the only one on the ship who wasn't wet. That wasn't for lack of rain, as he leaned on his cane and stared out over the bow. The other crew were too busy with securing the rigging and adjusting the sails against the wind to notice his weathered brown garment was completely dry. But Shelton noticed.

The wind pulled the man's grey beard, but each drop of water seemed to warp around his body, leaving a sharp circle of dryness around his mud-covered boots.

Shelton wiped the rain from his face and shouted over the wind, "We pull into port at sundown. You may want to get below decks." The old man nodded without turning. He seemed to be staring intently ahead of the bow of the ship, head locked, and his body was solid and unswaying on the deck without much effort while Shelton craned his hips and thighs to keep aright against the gale.

The gusts picked up speed and the ship's boom creaked as it swung violently, taking a few of the crew tumbling across the deck. He made out more shouting through the

wind. The sea was starting to pick up into high waves as the storm rolled in. He could smell fresh salt and brine.

As Shelton struggled against ropes to bring the boom around, he glanced at the old man and saw him stare at the deck and slowly turn around as if following a trail on along the boards. His eyes landed on Shelton and the others, and for a moment he looked forlorn and sad. It was a strange expression to see in the midst of the storm's panic. Shelton had no time for it, he continued pulling the boom.

A loud crunch erupted from aft with a tall plume of water. Shelton stumbled to his knees as the ship was yanked roughly to the side. The old man was suddenly in the air, clearing the rail. He twisted his body to clasp it with his hand and cane and set his feet on the outer hull. The ship started to pitch.

Shelton quickly scanned the turbulent seas for Imperial or Pirate vessels. There could be no rocks in these deep waters, so surely they were being fired on. Strange that he had heard no cannons.

Planks were coming apart at the seams, creaking and cracking. They curled or snapped as parts of the vessel were unceremoniously broken into chunks and plunged into the sea. Shelton was beyond terrified, hanging sideways onto the hull as the remnant began to rapidly sink, and for some reason he felt an urge to flee in the same direction as the old man, even while his other shipmates were leaping into the choppy tides below.

He clamored up to stand on the port hull of the fully pitched and sinking ship. The old man stood calmly as the foam and roaring waves slowly brought down the ship, and Shelton was overwhelmed with unnatural fear. But the old man directed his face in a quick circle around the hull

under his feet, briefly held up his cane and stamped it onto the wood.

The portside bow ripped in one smooth movement from it's nails, tar, and struts with the old man and Shelton standing on it. For a brief moment, they were airborne but somehow standing aright as the severed section of the ship seemed to jump of it's own accord into the roaring storm, rotate of some twenty degrees and put down roughly but flat into the sea.

Shelton fell to his stomach as soon as they landed, expecting to go under, but it didn't happen. The platform floated, and the old man still stood erect. He held his can firmly against the wooden floor and stared straight ahead, the direction the ship had been sailing.

Shelton glanced back and saw the last of the ship sink below the waves. Flotsam, debris, and bodies bobbed in the rolling waves. Some arms were waving and he could hear distant shouts carried on the winds.

"We must help them! There's room!" he shouted to the old man.

The old man turned slowly to face him. He didn't make any attempt to speak but just observed him. Shelton frowned and opened his mouth to plead again, but something about the old man halted his breath. As he stared into the wrinkled face - the pale face of any old Sojuk empire man - some significance, some weight began to creep into his mind. He was looking at someone special, someone great, and someone much older than the skin and bones before him.

It was dreams and myth, a howling instinctual reaction, that triggered every indicator in his chest and stomach. Magnitude beyond understanding. Like the old man would always be here, standing on this jagged ship piece. Like he

had always existed, before the empire, before the sea, before Tamareth itself. He was as ancient as remembering itself. He was a god.

"I'm sorry," the old man's voice spoke inside Shelton's head. Although the man stood in place, Shelton felt his body suddenly wrapped, picked up, and dumped into the rushing sea. He thrashed in the water trying to remove his heavy boots and clothing, coughing and sputtering when he crested the surface again, unable to get them off. But now where the old man and floating platform had been a moment ago there was nothing.

The last thing Shelton and his crew saw was a wave the size of a mountain, curling up straight like a wall, moving with slow sureness. Before it consumed them he thought he saw the old man atop his makeshift platform, standing still and easy, cane touching firmly, staring straight ahead, rising up, over, and onward.

"YOU CAN'T PUT a price on a good storm trough, Uso," Alokai heard his father chuckle from the front of their workshop.

Another deep voice promptly objected, "Be that as it may, what am I going to do if I don't like it? Swim to the mainland and find another builder? You charge too much, Loto."

The two men carried on their haggling in reserved, controlled tones while Alokai sighed and returned to his work. Large sheets of parchment with finely drawn lines and marks lay stretched in odd directions across a wide wooden desk. He repositioned his chair with a purse of his lips, pressed the crisp paper between his fingers, and pulled the design towards the corner of the desk where the afternoon sun struck the table top. The warm light felt good on his fingers and glinted off of the drying black ink.

The Talnu Va'nua wooden rail network was nearly complete, and thank the gods for it. Sometimes he wished that father hadn't raised him to full apprentice last summer. The quill scratched evenly across the parchment, a thin line of black running along an ink-stained wood plane. He kept

his eyes on the line, picked the rough cut wood block out of his belt and used it to mark perpendicular lines evenly spaced. Each scratch and scrape, he breathed in the ever-present oaky sawdust that shimmered in the light and smelled the lightly bitter smoke of the quill ink.

He stopped to inspect his work and heard the front door to the workshop close. A few dull thuds approached the room, and his father appeared leaning in the open door frame. He was a big, belly-over-buckle man. He wore a burlap over his legs and loosely-tied fronds around his chest and shoulders. Dark hair covered his crossed arms, calves, and bare feet. His hair was long and curly, but his face was as smooth as a child's and twice as jovial.

"Another drain, Kai," he said.

"Great," Alokai yawned, stretching his chest and glancing out the window.

"Oh, come now, I know it's no fancy empire contraption, but surely it's not that boring?" he said with a smile.

"It's fine, pa, I just wish-"

"That you could invent the most complicated thangamajig this island has ever seen?" Loto was starting to laugh now.

Alokai struggled to maintain a straight face as his father approached the drafting table, throwing his heavy arm over his shoulders, and looking down with mock-criticism at his current design. He pointed at a section of the rail line, "Maybe we can make this part go up into the air and do a wheel? Yes, they just need to pump and get enough speed up going downhill from there," he motioned towards the top of the mountain which had slightly more elevation.

Alokai chuffed and smiled, "Not enough speed."

Loto laughed. "Oh, it's speed you're worried about and not all of Galube'i calling us a pair of crazed loons? I think



you may need to be demoted," he said as he took the quill and continued drawing out the rail entrance to the mine.

Alokai remained quite while his father continued the construction design. Loto's strokes were masterful, sweeping smoothly and surely along the plane. His hands held the quill delicately but moved with intention and familiar ease. It was almost like a dance, watching the quill dip into the ink, touch, and run along the paper with each stroke deft and true.

He watched his father's eyes run along the paths of his hands, back to the scribbled measurements, and fluidly onto the the next section of the design. Alokai marvelled at how the numbers just seemed to speak to his father like a language. Loto could look at a parchment full of numbers and determine what needed to be done and where it needed to go.

"This has come along nicely, Kai," his father said without taking his eyes from the parchment, "We'll be able to make the trip up to start the mine tomorrow."

Alokai grunted and wandered over to stare out of the workshop window, as his father sprinkled sand over the wet ink on the design plans. Outside the land was lush with tall grass clumped between stretches of beach sand. Thin brown trees jutted out of the grass at slanted angles, bearing patches of bulbous mulefruit underneath wide green fronds which grew so large that their sides curled underneath. The position of the sun told him it was about time for supper. It glittered over the eastern sea and split through the trees to create a multitude of shadows on the ground. A breeze brought the sea into his nose, and he breathed deep.

"Well, all done here. Run these up to the chief, will you?" Loto said.

Alokai turned to find the parchment worked into a tight

roll with some string tied around it in his father's hand. "And make sure you leave enough time for yourself to pack up. We'll probably be there for a few days to get the job going."

As he was leaving the room, he idled a bit thinking how to ask what he really wanted. His father said with exaggerated resignation, "And yes, I think there'll be time this evening to continue with our secret project."

Alokai pumped his fist into the air and jogged out the workshop door. His sandals sank into the sand as he padded his way through the irregularly placed family homes that ran up the shoreline and curved inland. He couldn't help running his eyes along the exterior of the structures as he went. He noticed the rate of decay on the foundation posts was still slow. It looked like only a couple months of normal weathering had passed when they had actually put these homes up a couple years ago. That was good. The weather-proofing oil they came up with was working.

Along the shore fishermen were carrying boats on their shoulders up to a line of cleaning tables. Full nets hung by their sides as they walked, and the sharp scent of fish wafted past him. Cool breeze rolled like waves across the entire village, tussling the tops of the domes and licking up his arms. Women carried clay jars of produce or bundles of frond or wheat grains. Occasional children giggled or shouted and darted between the domed frond-topped huts.

The tribe temple was just inside the island mainland, surrounded by a wide circle of green grass. High beams jutted into the sky in cross-stitch pattern from a roof much taller than the huts. Its interior could easily fit three huts inside it. Decorative sheets with a multitude of vibrant colors were tied around each column.

The language of their people covered the sheets in intri-

cate linework and drawings. Alokai smiled as he revisited the familiar design, the joints and fittings, all the little details of the structure that he remembered from the countless evenings his father shared the work of designing it with him.

Before he could reach the temple, he heard a sharp squeel. He glanced over and saw a familiar group of leering adolescents, laughing harshly. They were behind a clump of trees, huddled around a pig that was flopping and struggling in the dirt. Alokai immediately came to a stop and instinctively looked for something to walk behind. A run-in with Mateo and his friends was the last thing he wanted today, but the sound of the pig made him squirm, and he flinched at each gyration the poor creature made.

"Hey, what is this?" He tried calling out in a firm voice. It came out lame and deflated instead.

Several of the boys spun around quickly, but when they realized it was him they visibly relaxed their shoulders and smirked. Alokai frowned and approached the tightly circled group. They seemed to smile more menacingly as he edged his way into the circle to view the crying pig.

It was on it's side trying to edge away from a bright red and yellow snake. It's back two legs were limp and dragging on the ground. There were two little red dots on it's hindquarters.

"Nothing to do for it, boys. Won't last much longer," Mateo said in an even voice. He hadn't noticed Alokai yet.

Alokai swallowed and glanced away for a moment. He heard Mateo chuckle. Another squeel from the pig returned Aokai's attention to the scene. The snake calmly waited, coiled at the pig's feet. It's eyes were locked on the pig. It's tongue rythmically flapping from it's mouth. It was biding it's time. It had already won.

One of the boys wore a tree felling axe hanging in his belt. Alokai eyed it and winced again as the pig's screeched in pain. "You can't let it suffer," he said angrily.

Mateo leaned up from his crouched position and glared at Alokai. He was tall, but not tallest among his friends. However, most people noticed the size of his bare arms, shoulders, and neck before anything else. The muscles through his forearm rippled as he wiped his soot stained hands on his dirty leather apron. He smelled like iron and smoke. His dark hair was lank. The tips were wet with recent sweat and clung to the underside of his square jaw.

"Well, look who has decided to bless us with their presence: our own master builder. Don't worry. You can build a tiny hut with the bones after we are done with our lunch." Mateo said through narrow green eyes.

The other boys laughed, some of them seemed to do it more forcefully than others. Alokai made an effort to keep his breathing steady while he thought desperately for what to say next. His eyes glanced from boy to boy, with no offer of help indicated in return. Mateo spoke again before he could offer a retort, "Why don't you do the honors yourself, Foreigner?"

He swiftly withdrew the axe from his friend's belt and stretched out his massive arm, presenting it to Alokai. Underneath the raised axe the pig scraped its two front legs helplessly into the ground, trying to drag its body further away from the snake. "Take it," Mateo prompted, his expression going neutral.

"I have lived here as long as any of you," Alokai said.

"Sure, anyone can tell just by looking at your dark, hairless ass," Mateo replied.

The boys laughed, but Alokai didn't rise to it. This insult wasn't anything he hadn't heard before.

Alokai took the axe, and the boys waited. It was heavy in his hand, and had he not tightened his wrist he probably would have dropped it. The head of the axe was hardly sharp. The wooden handle was worn down, with the grain smudged throughout the bottom and top. Alokai slowly walked through the circle and stood above the pig. The snake hissed and uncoiled a bit, but he kept the pig between them. "Hold this," he handed the rolled mine plans to one of the boys.

He gulped and wrapped both hands around the axe and hiked it above his head. \*Be at peace, pig. May Talo guide you to future seas.\* Several things happened at once. He brought the axe down with force on the pig's neck, and the animal screamed. To his horror, it continued to scream. \*Oh Talo, no!\* Alokai felt his body shudder as several of the boys shouted in excitement. Without thinking, he hacked down again harder, and finally after the third time the pig was still.

Alokai dropped the axe on the ground and backed up away from the dead pig already feeling nausea rising in his throat. Mateo, who had been watching quietly with arms folded, picked it up. He walked boldly to the snake and dispatched it in a single blow. The boys practically cheered, as Mateo held the headless, twitching snake in his free hand and lifted the wood axe victoriously with the other. Mateo's toothy smile increased the bile building at the back of his mouth.

He snatched the mine designs from one of the boys, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and stumbled out of the circle. He paced onwards towards the temple in wide steps. Mateo guffawed behind him, "You did great, Uso! We'll leave the bones at your home and the snake skin. Maybe you can make us a tent!" The boys laughed louder.

Their voices faded as he neared the temple, and he was

still shaking it off when he poked his head into the temple entrance. Maester Osu was sitting cross-legged over the smoking pyre in the center of the huge space. The smoke unfurled and drifted up in a steady stream to the middle of the roof where it was collected and expelled through the side pipes that led to the exterior. They allowed the smoke to exit but prevented rain from entering. Alokai remembered his father discussing the pros and cons of such a configuration.

He slipped off his sandals at the stone entrance, bowed to the pyre, and walked quietly to sit before Maester Osu. His thin limbs were comical inside his oversized, decorative leather dress with gaping sleeves. White hair was tied up out of his face and flowed down to the middle of his back. His bushy eyebrows were turned up, as if he were experiencing something pleasant, but his eyes were closed. He watched the priest's breathing rise and fall for a few moments. Then he spoke, "Maester, I have—"

"Shhhhh shhhh, Talo should like your greeting, Alokai," his low voice chided.

Alokai twisted his lips and huffed out of his nose. Snapping his head towards the pyre, he closed his eyes and gestured flippantly toward the fire. "Mercy, Divine One," he chanted, returning to face the Maester.

"There now," Maester Osu said, slowly opening his eyes and smiling, "what have we here?" He observed the rolled up parchment in Alokai's hands.

"It is the design for the mine construction in Talnu Va'nua. We also have the materials ready, and can travel tomorrow," he handed them over.

Osu gently unrolled the parchment and stretched them on the stone floor beside them. His face was pleased as he looked over the layout and measurements, materials list, the

positioning of the rails, the attention to detail. As flustered as Alokai was feeling, he was briefly overcome with a curiosity for Osu's opinion on their work and paid particular attention to him as he surveyed the plans.

After a moment, he nodded and seemed satisfied. "Loto has always been a great asset to this tribe, and no-one can dispute that. Watching his work has always been a great pleasure of mine. This will be another fine project," he said, rolling back up the plans carefully.

Alokai found he'd been unconsciously holding his breath and felt some small relief. As Osu handed over the roll he asked, "Have you been learning his art? I hear he has raised you to apprentice now."

"I...I have been trying, Maester. I still have much to learn," he replied.

The Maester nodded sagely. The corners of his eyes were soft and pleasant, as he gazes into the pyre. "And is he also teaching you his habit for creating eccentricities?"

Alokai smiled to himself. "Whatever do you mean?" he asked knowingly.

Osu laughed and placed a hand on his shoulder. It was warm and firm, belying the impression a person might have looking at his gaunt appendages. "Off with you then! Be about your business and give your father my salutation."

"Thank you, Maester." Alokai said. He got hastily to his feet, made a curt bow to the pyre, and left the temple as quickly as was considered proper.

The sun was setting as he walked back home. Passing the site of the pig, he found that Mateo and his friends had left taking the animal carcasses with them. Good riddance. He forced himself to not look at the blood marks that were still on the ground where he had failed to give the pig a quick end. A small lump formed in his throat, but he

stepped up his pace into a light jog and tried to focus on what would be happening once he got back home. The time passed quickly.

When he arrived at their hut, he found a neat pile of tiny bones in front of the door. Scowling, he kicked the pile out of the way and walked inside. His father called out from another room, "Kai? Grab us some food and help me with this."

Their hut was split between the workshop where they performed their jobs and their living quarters. Loto was working in the back already, and Alokai didn't want to miss any of it. He excitedly jogged to the cupboard and put some salted meat and a wheel of cheese on a small plate, popped a loaf of bread in his mouth, and grabbed a jug of clean water. Then he wobbily carried them into the back room of the workshop where he could hear the sound of a hammer clinking on something.

A variety of strangely shaped wood pieces the size of ox yolks were strewn on the floor of the small back room. They were nicely rounded on their outsides and hollow. Some of them looked like replicas of each other but in various sizes, and some of their ends were jagged from being broken. In the middle of the room was a pyre very similar to the one in the temple.

However, instead of smoke rising there was a kettle of water being boiled, and its top was covered with a domed brass lid. A hollow wooden cylinder was tarred and sealed to the top of the lid, and something his father called a 'plunger' was slowly rotating up and down which made a connected wheel spin on its own. Every few seconds the plunger would puff a small cloud of white smoke from its top which would rise up to the ceiling.

Alokai set the plate of food down on a workbench clut-



tered with other similar sets of plates and jugs. Odd shaped tools and pieces of metal bits were strewn around the bench top. "I think this one is working better," his father said, standing up from behind the contraption and grabbing some bread and meat. He was sweating from the heat of the fire. It was much hotter than normal cookfires. While his father ate and stared at the puffing machine, Alokai walked around it marvelling.

"One day, this will make a wagon move on it's own. All you'll have to do is keep the fire hot." Loto said between big bites, and motioned towards the stack of coal in a half-full bucket by the door. Alokai grabbed a few pieces and tossed them beneath the kettle.

"And keep filling the water, and make sure the seal doesn't break to the plunger tank, and make sure that it doesn't blow open," Alokai added absently as he inspected the machine.

His father laughed, "Yes, and those things." A few quiet moments passed while Alokai observed the puffing clouds of steam and Loto chewed. The open window in the room showed a view of the seaward side of the island, now a dim golden orange sky as the sun set.

"So, can we try it tomorrow?" Alokai asked with a grin. Loto held his gaze and swallowed some water from the jug.

"If we finish early, I don't see why not. But you pack it."

While they took turns eating their supper, they alternated stoking the coal fire and making notes on the parchment that recorded the design for their contraption. His father insisted on always keeping notes and numbers. He said it was how a good builder gets better.

RUNA SLIPPED the shovel into the top of the salt pile and lifted with her legs. The white granules dully sparkled in the afternoon sun as she walked out along the dormant crop rows. The muscles in her forearms and shoulders were taut and steady. She balanced the shovel alongside her body.

The ground was barren and dark but soft. It had been recently cultivated, maybe a season or two earlier. The rich scent of damp soil was barely noticeable beyond the overpowering stench of salt. It was littered on the ground like a thin blanket. Runa plodded mechanically to the end of the row where the soil was clear and carefully poured the salt over it.

She heard a voice a few rows distance say aloud, "Mind the shovel, now."

Runa didn't need to glance up but she did anyway. She knew it was Hoeg instructing the new girl who'd arrived yesterday. She would be lucky to last the month. As Runa returned for the next shovel of salt, she heard Hoeg continue his low talk to the girl.

"You hold it straight, see?" There was a pause. "Aye, now, tighten up along the handle."

She heard the girl's soft, scared voice barely above a whisper, "Like this?"

There was no reply. She suspected Hoeg had quietly nodded as he usually did. Runa approached the back of the salt wagon as two gangly young men were quietly forming small hills of salt from the back of the wagon to the front, within her reach. They had adolescent wisps of hair on their chins that wouldn't quite grow together into a beard, and their hair was a tangled mess of black. Unfamiliar people usually missed that they were twins.

"About another 10 minutes today, and we're done." Torj whispered. Runa nodded without looking up. She heard his brother Riki add, "If the boss doesn't lose her damn mind today."

"Shutup, you fool!" Torj replied. She heard a quick jostle and crunch of salt as Torj put his boot to his brother's hip. Runa ignored it and drove her handle into the pile smoothly, grabbed another shovel full, and wandered back to her row.

The girl was walking across her path. She was petite and smooth faced, only a few years younger than Runa. Her chopped dark hair still had the mostly clean sheen of one who wasn't born into slavery for the Empire but was brought into it. Her clothes were the same rags as everyone else's but there wasn't the same dirt stains on her arms and neck yet.

Runa guessed she had been a peasant from the most recent military target, the town of Vahky. She'd need to learn quite a different skill set to survive now. "Watch yourself," she growled.

The girl was startled and winced away from her. Runa

could see the vulnerability in her eyes. She internally shook her head. That would need to change. Hoeg was not far behind the girl and gave Runa a quizzical look to which she returned a huff and flexed her nostrils.

Hoeg was older than the rest of them, including herself, but he wasn't yet an old man. There was only the hint of a wrinkle around his eyes, and the gray had only just started to sprinkle around his short hair. His arms were laced with scratches and scrapes from work, and his face was dusty and dry. His skin looked as though it might crack if you pulled too hard. Hoeg had been in the group the longest except for herself.

The three of them marched out to the edges of the salt and delivered more onto the ground. It would have been a silent affair except for the sounds of clashing steel, shouted orders, and the rumble of large wheeled war machines coming from beyond the hills in front of them.

Snakes of gray-black smoke curled from various points. Runa had grown accustomed to the smell of burnt oil, wood, flesh, and iron. The catapults rhythmic launching of flaming ingots was a grating boom that occasionally synchronized with the beat of her heart. The spheres would occasionally crest the horizon, briefly flailing with orange rage, and disappear further afield.

As she slung the last of the salt onto the field, Runa took a moment to pause and survey their progress. This field was nearly done. The white poison would ensure that nothing ever grew here again. She felt a pang of sadness that she instantly banished. She was too tired, and there was no hope for anyone in this land. Be it in battle or in bondage, they all fall.

A familiar horn blast sounded from behind them, and a

long haired figure on a horse galloped up near the wagon. "Pack it up, you dogs," the slavemaster shouted.

Torj and Riki were nearly prostrate on the floor of the wagon, as she addressed them and everyone else in a sweeping semi-circle. Her horse was adorned with dull armor along it's neck, back, and hindquarters. The woman herself was strapped into leather armored coverings more suitable for a warrior than a slavemaster.

It made sense, Runa thought as she took her place in the single file line they formed before her, she had come from the ranks after their last master was slain during a well-timed Tunen foray last week. It explained all the ridiculous ceremony she demanded.

The new girl struggled to appear calm, but Runa could see the knuckles of her hand white from clasping her pant leg. Master dismounted her horse in a fluid motion. Her legs and arms were powerful, even more-so than Runa's. She walked with a wide, sure gait and held her back straight. Her deep set blue eyes and evenly cut blonde hair gave her a distinctly proud demeanor.

But the smirking curl of her lip and the cold intensity of her gaze told the real story. She removed the shackles from her horse's saddlebags and tossed each one to the group. Torj and Riki fumbled for theirs. Hoeg caught his easily. The new girl didn't react fast enough, and the thick, iron cuffs clipped her temple above her left eye. A thin, bloody line was visible as the girl sucked in her breath and retrieved them from the ground.

The others squinted and remained uncomfortably still. Hoeg managed a brief glance at the new girl and Runa could see him hiding his anger. The master let her gaze linger briefly on Runa. Her eyes were sparkling with some-

thing that disgusted Runa. It was giddiness. The slavemaster was enjoying this, and at the same time was goading them.

She threw the Runa's cuffs sharply at her face, but Runa caught them with one hand. The rusted metal painfully pinched her palm and the second cuff swung around its chain links slicing the back of her hand, but she didn't flinch. She set her eyes solidly on the slavemaster's. The woman's smirk twitched, and her expression slowly turned into irritation. She turned back to the group.

"Get them on," she commanded as she mounted the steed again, "and let's move."

Runa latched hers around her wrists and took her position at the head of the wagon pole. It was a long thick wooden trunk with hewn pegs at even spaces along the trunk for slaves to clasp and push with. Torj and Riki tried to lend the new girl a hand, as she was unsteady on her feet. The cut on her temple had leaked blood over her eye, and she was wiping it out of her face, smearing the red around her cheek and hair.

"No!" Master shouted from the horse, "she'll live. Get this wagon moving now." The two young men froze and slowly backed away from the girl. They stared at the ground with their heads down, taking their positions at the wagon. Runa noticed Hoeg had already anticipated and was already in position behind her.

The new girl was shivering, and she wiped at the blood, but she trudged to the wagon and grasped the peg directly beside Runa. She looked briefly at her, and there was pain, hopelessness, and anger in her face. Runa swallowed hard and looked forward, toward their task.

Master rode behind the wagon as they turned it and pushed it back through the salted crop field. The wooden wheels tumbled and groaned along the pinion. Runa

focused on her hands and arms, keeping the muscles taut and engaged as they pushed. It wasn't the effort that tired a body, it was the ebb and flow of resistance. It was the starting and stopping, the hope and despair. To be continuous, that was the only way to maintain and avoid disappointment.

As they passed from the crop field, the wagon wheels turned easier on top of smoother terrain. Barren, flat soil stretched before them. The ground was scattered sparsely with withered shrubs and clumps of brown grass between vast stretches of empty space. Some of that space had huge gouges in the earth and old barricades of dirt packed into now-abandoned trenches, encampments, and levies.

One of them was still populated with a collection of large rope and leather tents. Cookfires were built in tight proximity in the center of the camp, and Sojuk soldiers were about their business of their evening meal. A patrol of them, twelve in all and donned with light armor, were being led by a Cavalier in a thick metal armor plate around his torso and a broad sword strapped over his back. The dust was pluming up around them as they marched in loose formation around the wide perimeter of the camp.

Runa noticed a speck of blood drop onto the light wood grain of the wagon pole she was holding. She glanced up at the new girl and saw the blood was coming down quickly, a trail led down to her chin where the drops were flinging with the movement of her struggle to push.

"Ease up a little," she said quietly.

The girl seemed to wake from a fog and looked over at her with surprise. "Huh?"

"Stop pushing so hard. You don't add much to us anyway. No need to shove the blood right out of your head," she said.

The girl looked away at her feet and Runa felt her stop

pushing as hard. They were nearly at camp. "Am I going to die here?" she suddenly asked. The girl's voice was quiet but choked. Runa saw that her eyes were welling up with tears.

Runa frowned and stared forward through the noisy camp, "Probably."

"We'll cut some cloth and bandage your head when we return, Alma. You will be fine," Hoeg asserted gruffly from behind Runa. Runa could hear the disapproval in his voice.

Alma sniffled once, took in a centering breath, and promptly wiped the her eyes and cheeks. Little trails of clean skin now smeared together in a mixture of dust, dirt, and tears. Except for the grime and dirt, the girl was beautiful in a quaint way, probably the envy of many nearby farm hands. Her hair used to be silken and straight, flowing brown - now chopped at the ears and tangled with small knots. Her neck was thin, long, and delicate like her cheeks and nose.

In truth, Runa thought, Alma should worry more about probing hands. She glanced around at the male soldiers squatting or standing over their cook fires. Many of them were still wearing armor and fresh from the field. The wounded would be tended up near the sick tent at the end of camp furthest from the front line.

A few of them smiled cruelly as they passed, while most simply stared down at their meal or steadily into their fires. Of those who did stare, Runa clenched her teeth as some of them licked their lips and eyed her and Alma up and down.

The group finally arrived at the slave quarters, a tight fenced encampment of a few buildings for sleeping, eating, and privy needs. Master trotted to the front and issued a few short orders to the gatemen who opened the double doors by removing a large log from the latch. She sat calmly on her mount watching with a half smile on her face as Runa



and her fellow slaves shoved the wagon into its berth adjacent to the fencing and heaved sighs of relief as they released their positions.

Master dismounted and one-by-one unshackled the group, while one of the gate guards lugged a satchel of grain and several jugs of water inside the enclosure for their dinner. She did Runa last, twisting the iron braces viciously to more easily reach with the key. Runa gritted but remained neutral.

After she was done she sauntered to the gate without a word and the heavy thud of the log could be heard dropping into place as the gates closed. Torj and Riki visibly relaxed and started shaking out the soreness in their arms and shoulders. Hoeg was already at Alma's side commanding her attention as he assessed the wound on her face.

Runa pursed her lips and retrieved the sack of grain, walking it into the meal shack. She called out of the open doorway as she gathered the bowls off of the rickety table in the center of the small room. "Get the water, Torj. Riki, fetch some wood for the fire."

Outside, she could hear Hoeg speaking. "...pretty easy to get infected out here. You're better off tying something around your head. Come, we'll take some fabric from one of the blankets."

"Better not be my blanket!" Runa shouted to them as used a stick to dig and shove grey ashes around the cookware area that had been carved into the floor of the shack and lined with brown rocks. There was no response as they both left earshot, into the sleeping quarters.

Torj huffed into the room and hefted the water jugs onto the table. Runa tossed him a warped wooden bowl. He caught it gratefully and poured a half measure of water from which he drank carefully and completely. The jostling of

sticks and crunch of feet signaled Riki's arrival. He came through the doorway and dropped the wood next to the pit, immediately taking a place beside his brother who was already pouring him a bowl.

Runa arranged the tinder and after a few minutes of rigorously working the flint, a tiny flame fizzled to life and began slowly growing. "You're up," Riki muttered to Torj who was starting to doze with his back against the shack wall.

He came to and took over growing the fire as Runa stepped outside for a few breaths of cooler air. The sun was setting beyond distant hills and the temperature was cooling down substantially, as if cool fingers were soothing her arms and neck. The deep orange glow of the fading sun cast long shadows of pikes, the haphazard wooden walls of the enclosure, the tall scout towers that could be seen at the corners of the Empire's forward battalion.

Alma and Hoeg had returned and the girl had a neatly cut piece of cloth in her hands. "We'll need to rinse out the wound before we put this on. Afraid you have a likelihood of infection even from the cloth - Talo knows how long it's gone without a wash. But it's better than leaving it open."

Alma glanced briefly at Runa but continued walking with Hoeg into the meal shack. Runa was about to return but a sensation prickled along her back and up her neck making her think someone was nearby or watching her. It was akin to a breeze, but the wind wasn't blowing. She tensed her body and looked around alert, but there was nothing save the mumble of distant soldiers talking over their fires, the clank and groan of other wagon wheels crunching over the dry ground, and the distant howl of the featherhounds crooning to each other from the jutting peaks of the Scythe.

She often found herself staring at the the Scythe, and tonight was no different. Those mountains were like giant iron sentinels warding off those who would presume to travel them. Their tips seemed to launch right into the sky and on misty days disappear entirely above the clouds. It was as though Tamareth itself had created a wall, meant to protect the Tunen Realm from the Empire. Or to trap them.

Runa huffed and returned to the shack. She took over the fire and prepared the grain in boiling water. Alma, wound cleaned with water, now had the cloth tied around her head and was sitting at the table. Hoeg had finished his water and was sitting on the ground in the corner leaning his head back, almost asleep.

Torj took out a small dark bottle from somewhere behind him and set it on the table in front of Alma. "For the pain," He said.

"Whiskey? Where'd you find that?" Riki asked immediately. Runa was impressed, as well.

"I stumbled into an idle cookfire on the way to the fields this morning, and suddenly this bottle was in the back of my pants, honestly," he replied with a crooked smile.

"You kept that hidden the entire day?" Runa asked.

Riki chuckled, "Well, if you'd have gotten closer you'd have smelled how well he kept it hidden. Half of it is gone."

Hoeg shook his head reprovingly. "You're playing a dangerous game. Master catches you with this and you're likely to get a lot of pain."

Torj dismissed the comment and shrugged, "It's pain anyway, Hoeg. I'd rather die with a little fire in my gut."

Alma picked up the bottle and took a quick swig from it. Her face contorted slightly with the burn as she swallowed it down, but she thanked Torj quietly and handed it back to him.

The pot of oatmeal was bubbling as Runa removed it from the flames. She spooned portions into each bowl and handed them out. Hoeg came to the table as Runa was sitting down. Torj and Riki began to eat right away, tilting their bowls back to their mouths. Hoeg cleared his throat loudly, causing them to pause and roll their eyes. He prayed, "Talo, Divine One, nourish us that suffer and provide hope for the hopeless."

"...also bring me a pony for midwinter's day, and lots of sweet rolls," Riki chuckled.

Hoeg scowled and focused on eating his meal. Runa payed no mind and ate, but Alma eyed the food cautiously. Not, Runa imagined, for mistrust of it's effects but more on it's appearance. It was a gray, gellatinous muck, hardly appetizing to even those who were starving. She quietly regarded Hoeg and asked, "Is Talo your god?"

"Talo is the one god, the only. He is the god of my people in the west, off the isles of Manua," Hoeg replied solemnly.

Alma nodded slowly, "Manua is a long way from here."

Hoeg looked into his bowl as he ate, "It has been a long journey."

The finished their meal in silence and each in turn sat back against the shack walls as the glow outside the doorway faded into darkness and the glow from the fire cast shadows across the room.

Runa heard the gate swing open and the booted tread of soldiers. She sat up straighter in her seat and positioned her feet squarely onto the floor. Torj, Riki, and Hoeg looked startled but quickly hid it as best they could. Only Alma seemed to be unaware as to what was happening.

There was gruff laughter shared between the soldiers as they stepped into the doorway of the shack. Runa could smell campfire and whiskey reeking from their breaths as

one sputtered, "Hear you lot have some new lass helping with the salt. Thought we'd show her around the camp."

It only took a moment for Alma to realize her situation and then panic and utter fear rose on her face. Her hands shook as she grasped the table.

He could barely contain himself from laughing, while his drunken partner made no effort to restrain himself and guffawed. "Come on, you. Let's have a look."

One of them walked behind Torj and Riki and was reaching to grab her arm. Hoeg was one his feet in a split second and his elbow connected solidly with the soldier's temple, sending him stumbling backwards.

"Hey!" The other soldier shouted, reaching for the short sword in his scabbard. Runa was over the table and flung her legs into the soldier's chest. He smashed back into the wall of shack, shaking the small structure violently. While he clutched his chest and tried to regain the wind that had been knocked out of him, she kneed him in the groin and threw him out of the shack. She gripped the soldier that Hoeg stunned in a choke hold and backed out of the shack with him so that it was just her and the two soldiers in the enclosure yard. She knew how this would end, and it would be better to keep the punishment isolated to as few of their number as possible.

Hoeg tried to assist her, but the warning in her eyes made him pause even as he silently argued back with his own. The guards at the gate had signaled for nearby help and now rushed to the source of the commotion. Runa released and shoved the soldier into his partner. The gatesmen didn't stop to ask questions, and Runa didn't attempt to resist them. They matter-of-factly pulled out their short clubs and struck her. The clubs connected with her stomach, shoulder, and head. One gripped her by the

cloth shirt and spun her, tearing it half off while the other battered her with the club. The world spun in blur and she found herself on the ground a moment later. She felt a sharp snap in one of her ribs as a kick lanced into her side, the booted toe cracking a rib.

The pain was fire around her body, but she clenched her teeth. The worst of it was over now, as the two drunken soldiers got shakily to their feet. One of them tended to what was most likely a broken nose from Hoeg, and the other, having finally regained his breath, glared at Runa and gave her a frustrated kick albeit ineffectual due to his intoxication. He decided the evening wasn't worth the trouble and they both walked out of the enclosure and back to their fires.

The gatesmen left Runa on the ground without a word and returned to their post, replacing the log over the gate. After they were gone, Torj, Riki, and Hoeg came quickly out of the shack and helped her into the sleeping quarters, checking her for broken bones and doing what they could to be gentle. Alma came with them looking pale-faced and teary-eyed.

As they set her on one of the bedding piles, Alma blurted in a shocked voice, "Did they do that to your back?" On Runa's back she could see small black stones almost as pure in color as a gem. Some were the size of a pebble and a few were as large as an egg. It seemed as if they had been thrown into her back where they remained sunken halfway into the skin, but there was no blood or red scar. The skin seemed to come to each edge of the stones as if they might be decorative in some strange otherworldly culture. The fading evening light reflected off of some of the stones surfaces briefly as Runa lay.

“No,” she replied curtly, pulling the hanging part of her shirt to cover her back.

There wasn’t much talking for the rest of the evening, and Runa remembered very little as the pain swelled. She watched the ceiling of the sleep quarters change shades as the light went completely out. The glow of the fire from the meal room flickered, and she could hear the low, worried voices of Torj and Hoeg talking.

The last thing she remembered was imagining that the pain was going away, the ribs in her side were weaving back together, the bruises and cuts were rapidly healing, and one of the featherhounds had ventured curiously far from the Scythe and was pacing around just outside of the Empire’s war camp.

ALOKAI SAT on the back of the wagon with his legs hanging a few inches off the ground. He turned the worn wooden square 90 degrees and smoothed his paper out across its surface. He squinted, sighed, and tossed his wide brimmed hat behind him roughly. "I can't figure out the pressure!" He shouted.

Loto called through the tented wagon where curtains separated the coach seat, "Can't you multiply by the volume?"

One of the ox pulling the wagon chuffed at the sudden voice of his father who'd been silent for some time. But their rhythmic clapping continued unchanged. A set of four wagons in caravan together had been on the road to Talnu Va'nua since yesterday.

"If I do that, I get crazy numbers. We would need a boiler the size of this wagon."

Lots chuckled, "Sounds reasonable to me. How do you know you're wrong?"

Alokai paused, frowned and turned around to stare at his father.



“But that... that can’t be right, surely...”

“How can you know for sure if you don’t try it?”

Alokai huffed in exasperation and turned around to look out over the passing beach. “That would take forever. It would take me weeks to build that size boiler and all that wasted time if it doesn’t work?”

“Great things take great risk. You have to decide what you’re after.”

A sharp voice called out at the head of the caravan and the wagons rolled gently to a stop. They were at Talnu Va’nua. He heard Loto call out and hop down from the seat. Alokai bounced off the edge of the wagon and walked around to see the port village glowing in the morning sun, rose hues wrapping around the huts and planked board walks that stretched out over the low waves cascading inland. The Bay of Manua was warm and peaceful today, and Alokai quietly enjoyed the cool breeze rolling along the beach and up his arms. The scent of salt, fish, and fires made him feel at home and at ease.

The village was easily double the size of Galube’i and busier. Their port saw frequent ship traffic from the Empire mainland for trade goods, news, and traveling fleets. Most of the village structures were built to support the port, evident by the taller squarish units for dockside trade and storage, a couple inns that could house a decently sized ship’s worth of crew. Alokai noticed there was a newly christened Empire schooner tied at one of the piers. His father noticed it, too.

“They’ve come already, I see. Stone not even out of the ground and they are salivating like dogs.” Loto commented in a low voice, shaking his head.

“The Sojuks? Why?” Alokai asked.

“The war, I suppose. It’s always war. Takes materials to

keep a siege running. From what I hear, the northlanders are a brutal people and the Empire is losing ground.”

“What!? What will happen to us?” Alokai shouted.

Loto laughed, “Oh, calm down. The northlanders I’m sure just want to be left alone, and the Empire isn’t going anywhere. I think they just want someone else to conquer. Besides,” he clapped Alokai’s shoulder and smirked, “It’s more business for us! We get to setup this mine rail, and you get to build a wagon-sized boiler. Let’s get setup.”

Alokai rolled his eyes and returned to the wagons. The village’s residents lived in huts set back and scattered some distance from the port until the flat lush land met the fairly steep bluffs of the island’s lone hills. While they were a far cry from the majesty of the Scythe or the Dagger, they always seemed to Alokai to have an air of majesty to them. He could believe that they had stories in them, just as the older men of the island were fond of telling.

Alokai could make out the beginnings of a tunnel in the rock face high off the ground. A thin ledge wound around the sides of the bluff to the entrance, but this is where he and Loto would lay the rail.

As their wagon train reached the base of the cliffs, Loto handed out orders and instructions to their small crew of carpenters and haulers. They spent the morning hours with the haulers unloading their wood, stone, tar, and nails into neat piles positioned below the mine opening. Loto helped mount and pulley a rope crane with a small platform for moving materials. The carpenters arranged a small pen of workspaces for their saws and measuring, and assembled some scaffolding that spiderwebbed across the bluffs.

A small tent was setup for Alokai to unfurl their parchment designs on a wide drafting table. Loto headed into the village proper to meet with and discuss the project with the

local chief, but they work crew was to continue with the task as planned.

As the work began in earnest Alokai found himself scrutinizing the plans inside the tent as some of the older men stood silently around him, looking at the plans with consideration.

“Those struts are double wide?” Fetu, one of the more experienced of the carpenters grunted.

“Yes. The load cart will be substantial,” Alokai replied, staring at the design.

Fetu sighed but was acquiescent, “Going to take longer.”

Alokai recalled an often spoken phrase from his father and blurted, “The fast builder’s job requires a good one’s correction.”

Some of the other carpenters chuckled softly as Fetu pursed his lips. “You going to help us then?” He asked.

Alokai smiled and hefted a hammer. The crew split into pairs and began the work of laying the posts and the rail base. Alokai, being smaller, was at the furthest ends of each new rail section, aligning the struts, bolting, and hammering joists together. He called out to the cutters on the ground to chop the boards at precise sizes.

However, he didn’t need to measure. He carried it all inside. The plans were tacked to the walls of his mind, and he could summon a picture of them at will. He remembered the stretches of ink, the angles, the marks of units, the comments, scribbles, and legends. He knew them like he knew the lines of his father’s face.

In the afternoon, Loto returned with a guest. Alokai was taking a break on top of the most recently installed rail section, eating a piece of hard cheese and onion. He reclined with his arms behind him on the wood, warm from the sun. The man walking with Loto was obviously from the

mainland Empire, he judged, based on the tight fitting clothing that wrapped closely around his legs, the buttoned front shirt, and the jaunty angled hat. "Ho, Kai!" His father shouted up to him.

As Alokai dropped and approached them he could make out the man's appearance better. He was a larger man, but soft in the gut. His skin was paler than theirs but he had a bushy black beard which he stroked absently. His eyes studied the scaffolding and the rail while his eyebrows were slightly furrowed as if what he saw displeased him. Loto seemed somewhat oblivious to the discomfort of his guest.

"Henric, this is my apprentice and son, Alokai," Loto introduced.

The man inclined his chin very slightly as he regarded Alokai. "Pleased," he said, looking anything but. He quickly returned his attention to the rail, "Do you mean to say that this is all you've constructed so far?"

Alokai was beginning to feel hot and turned his head away, as if reviewing their progress thus far. He heard Loto reply, "The fast builder's job requires a good one's correction."

Henric snorted with derision, "Perhaps I should lend you my craftsmen and they can demonstrate for you how to build both with speed and with quality?"

Some of the hammering from one of their carpenters quickly stopped. Alokai clenched his fingers into his hands, but Loto suddenly laughed in a carefree, unforced way that Alokai was surprised.

"Come, let me show you this. I think maybe you've not seen something like what we are making before," he ushered Henric away and the two men walked along the narrow cliffside path and up into the mine entrance.

For a moment, Alokai didn't know what to do. He stood

angrily watching where they had been. Fetu approached him and said in a quiet voice, "That fat Sojuk idiot wouldn't know good work if I hit him with it in the head. Don't worry about him, Kai."

Alokai chuckled obligingly, but his fingers were still tightly closed. He wasn't angry at the Empire trader. He was disappointed with his father. Couldn't he see how he was being shamed and treated so poorly? Didn't he see that the Empire considered them a laughing stock - some pitiable people good only for stuffing their ships?

He tried to return to his work on the rail, but soon a commotion erupted from the mine's opening. It sounded like a bang and a clang. Two of the haulers scrambled down the cliff as bits of rubble sprinkled alongside their hurried steps. "Kai!" One of them shouted to him.

They had wide eyed expressions and were out of breath, "The steam axe is out of control! Loto needs you!"

Alokai started running up the hill to the mine, watching as grayish steam wafted out and up over the opening. He could hear a dull roaring sound as he entered the dark cavern and rushed towards the fire at the far end of the space. It was large and fanning around the bottom of a metal cylinder like a flaming hand.

Loto was standing on the frame of the crank wheel struggling with the safety valve on the top of the boiler. The engine was rattling and clanking violently, and Alokai could see the metal surface of the boiler and piston wobbling and throbbing. The wheel was spinning almost too fast to see as the pinion crushed repeatedly into the dark ore in the cavern wall. Little chunks of ore were popping off of the wall and bouncing across the cavern floor.

The Sojuk, Henric, stood far away watching with concern, looking unable to decide if he should remain or

flee. Alokai ran to help, but Loto shouted something that he couldn't make out and gestured wildly for him to stay back. He stood stuck and in despair, looking around for anything that might help. The cavern was hot with the fire and the metal of the boiler seemed to be glowing. Loto was trying to pry off the safety valve. It must have been stuck. Making a decision, Alokai rushed to close the gap between him and the tank to help Loto get the safety valve off.

Loto shouted one last time as a strange screech echoed through the cavern. His father moved his body in front of him just as the metal boiler was shorn and shattered in a flash of light and deep thunder. Alokai felt his body blown backwards and everything went black.