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A SCORCHING SUN seared the windswept Stygian landscape. The temperature climbed to unseasonable heights, even for this normally torrid land. Flowers wilted on their vines. Small pools of water evaporated overnight, leaving chalky mineral rings where they'd been.

Shehkmi al Nasir was barely aware of the dramatic change in the weather. He had not ventured beyond the walls of his own compound in weeks. The magics he had been working were wearing on him, so now he sought relaxation. Lounging in a deep copper tub, the sorcerer allowed three slave girls to bathe him, in water scented with oils and spices. Two of the girls were Kushites, the third the youngest niece of a Hyrkanian prince. She was a girl of surpassing beauty, with flame-red hair and flashing

emerald eyes. Like the others—also beauties, but without her royal blood—she was dressed in only the scantiest silk breeches, lest her garb get soaked by the bathwater.

If any of the girls found him repulsive, with his tattooed, scarred face, his slashed-away earlobes, his vulturelike head, they knew better than to show it. Al Nasir was not known for his mercy or understanding. Everyone in his household had heard stories of his fearsome flights of rage, and they tried hard not to incite them.

Just now, his attention was not on the girls, lovely as they were. His thoughts were far away, on the ship that wended toward him carrying a rare prize. He had researched the strange Pictish crown that the Aquilonian mage Kanilla Rey had asked him about. He'd had to scour the most ancient texts he had: scrolls that he feared would turn to dust in his hands, old brittle-paged volumes. Finally, in a book with no title at all, but just an unknown symbol burned into its binding of human skin, he found that which he sought. The crown had a special significance to the Picts, but it had been around since long before the Great Cataclysm. Lemurians had known of it, and their songs spoke of its power. Atlanteans had coveted it. Battles had been fought for possession of the crown, and thousands had died in quest of it. How it finally came into possession of the Picts was not recorded, nor was it known where they kept it.

What he could surmise was that it was an object of great power—too great to be left to the savage Picts. They claimed it, but it was no more theirs than the sun or the moon was.

And soon it would belong to Shehkmi al Nasir. He was already a tremendously potent sorcerer. Whether this would give him the ability to challenge Thoth Amon's status as the greatest of Stygian mages, he knew not.

Even if it didn't, it would firmly ensconce him in second place. In a land dedicated to the pursuit of the dark arts, that was still a position to be valued. He would be respected, feared throughout the land, as he had never been before.

Shehkmi al Nasir chuckled dryly. The sound of his awful laughter raised goose bumps on the flesh of the girls who washed him.

EVERYONE CALLED THE ship the *Restless Heart*, even though the name *Barachan Spur* had been painted on her. But the *Spur* had been the name the Argossean pirates who had tried to commandeer her had called her by. Since they were all dead, or back on the coast of Shem, the surviving sailors of the original *Restless Heart*, and those of her passengers who yet lived, used the ship's original name. Most of their number, including the ship's Captain Ferrin, were buried back in Shem. Gorian of Aquilonia was in command now. He had magic at his disposal, which he had used to dispatch the buccaneers. His small troop of mercenaries already swore fealty to him. Upon seeing his magic at work, the *Heart's* original crew did the same.

The only ones on board who had not specifically

promised their allegiance to Gorian were Alanya and Donial, the children of Invictus; their traveling companion Kral, a young Pict; and Mikelo, a Zingaran boy who had been a captive of the pirates. Alanya, Donial, and Kral were paying passengers. Mikelo, having been rescued from the Argosseans, had agreed to stay with the others until they returned to Aquilonia, from which he would make his own way home. But that would have to wait. The *Restless Heart* was bound for Stygia, in the opposite direction. Alanya hoped they all survived to travel back the other way.

The four of them had been allowed to keep the cabin that she, Donial, and Kral had rented at the journey's beginning. There were four bunks in the cabin, so while it was a squeeze, it was still more comfortable than the crew's quarters. With the porthole open, fresh salt air blew into the cabin, erasing the scents of four people closely confined.

Alanya sat in her bunk now, staring off toward the porthole and the cloudless blue sky beyond it, trying to make sense of her stew of emotions. While she was pleased that they were once again headed for Stygia, where Kral hoped to find the Teeth of the Ice Bear, a mystical crown stolen from his people by her uncle Lupinius, she dearly wished she were back home in Aquilonia. She wished, too, that her father had not been killed—probably by Lupinius. She wished her brother had not been forced to kill a man in battle. Since that day, he had been even moodier and more sullen than usual, if possible. She admired Kral, but believed he

barely noticed her, except as a traveling companion and helpmate. At the same time, she found Mikelo's fascination with her unnerving. He was younger than she, and she had learned that she preferred men without the patina of civilization that he wore. Kral, with the dark hair and skin common to the Picts, savage and natural, was much more to her liking.

It all piled up inside her like leaves in a courtyard on an autumn day. She sighed involuntarily. Mikelo, who had stayed in their cabin even though Kral and Donial had both gone on deck, glanced over at her. "Is something wrong?" he asked solicitously.

"No," she said. Even as she spoke she knew it was just a reflexive answer, far from the truth. In her fifteen years, had anything ever been more wrong? "Maybe. I think I am simply weary, and confused."

"Confused about what?" he pressed.

She didn't know how to put her flurry of thoughts and feelings into words, or even if she should try. "I don't know. Everything. It is all . . . too much, that's all."

"Can I ask a question?"

"Of course," she said, not bothering to point out that he had been asking them all along.

"Why are you going to Stygia? What is it you seek there? I spent part of last winter there, when Kunios had an arrangement to dock in Khemi for a trading expedition, and that was enough for a lifetime."

Alanya knew that he had asked Donial the same question. Her younger brother had declined to answer. He believed, as did Alanya, that because it was Kral's

quest, it should be up to him to decide to tell others or not. She had spoken to Kral about it, however, and he had indicated that he had no reason to keep it a secret from Mikelo. By helping them try to escape, the Zingaran boy had earned his way into their little group. Kral suggested that they might need another ally, particularly one who had been to Stygia and knew some of the language. Next time he asked, Kral said, she should feel free to tell him. She had hoped it would be Kral himself that Mikelo would ask, so she wouldn't have to.

But he had, so she took a deep breath and began the explanation. "A crown was stolen from Kral's clan," she said. "A precious antiquity with some sort of mystical significance to the Picts. We believe it has been taken by some Stygian priests, who are bringing it to Stygia. We mean to find it so Kral can take it back to his home."

Mikelo was not satisfied with the quick explanation. "How did it come to be stolen?"

Another sigh. She had hoped not to have to tell the whole story again. But the ship was quiet, as ships go. Winds filled the sails, men knew their tasks and did them, water splashed rhythmically against the hull. So she crossed her legs, making herself comfortable on her bunk. Mikelo did the same. Once they were settled, she started from the beginning. Her meeting with Kral in the woods outside the settlement of Koronaka. Their discovery by Donial, who reported what he had seen to Lupinius, their uncle. Lupinius's overreaction, and the subsequent raid on the Pictish village, which she was now convinced had some ulterior motive. Lupinius's

probable murder of her father and his theft of the crown. She hesitated a little before telling him of Kral's murderous assault on Koronaka as the "Ghost of the Wall." But Kral had given her permission to tell everything, so she did. She described the trip back to Tarantia, after Lupinius had left Koronaka in the dead of night. How he had taken over her father's house and been slain in it as he tried to sell the crown to a thief. How she, Donial, and Kral had found him, barely clinging to life, and called for help. The unexpected visit from King Conan, which impressed him almost as much as it still did her. And then how Kral had been arrested for Lupinius's murder and how they had broken him out of jail. Mikelo sat silently, his brown eyes wide with wonder, during the entire story. When she got to the part where a freak storm grounded the *Restless Heart* on a reef off the coast of Shem—which was where they had met Mikelo—he whistled.

"You have had some amazing adventures," he said.

"More than enough adventure for me," Alanya said. "I never sought adventure. I would happily spend the rest of my life at home in Tarantia."

Mikelo's nod made his thick shock of light brown hair bob. He was a slight boy, but his energy and vigor made up for any frailty. "Still, since you are just now on the way to Stygia, it will be some time before you can do that."

"I know," she said sadly. "You asked if something was wrong. I guess that's it. I wish, more than anything, that I was not here, that none of this had ever happened.

Except for the meeting Kral part. That was good. The rest of it has been nothing but trouble.”

She knew that Mikelo, like most Zingarans, considered the Picts natural enemies. But in the days since the pirates he had traveled with had attacked the marooned crew and passengers of the *Restless Heart*, he had come to know Kral. As seemed to happen so often, Alanya thought, becoming acquainted with an individual made it hard to cling to one’s preconceived notions of an entire people. He had not yet taken Kral into his heart as fully as she and Donial had, but he seemed more trusting and genuinely concerned for the Pict’s welfare.

“I am sorry,” he said, “that it has been such an ordeal for you.”

She felt the rocking of the boat, listened to the creak of wood and the snap of sailcloth. She understood that her answer had been the facile one, leaving out more than it revealed. Had it really been so bad? Yes, there had been many times when she had feared for her life and those of her friends. There had been danger and terror, loss and profound sorrow.

But hadn’t there been other things, too? Good things? Discoveries about herself and her friends? They had all tapped previously unknown reservoirs of courage, had demonstrated their trust and faith in one another time after time. Just when things looked most bleak, they had come through for each other.

Her throat was dry from talking, and she didn’t think she could explain all that to Mikelo anyway. Instead of answering, she just offered him a shrug of her shoulders.

“Let’s go on deck,” she suggested. “Maybe Donial and Kral are doing something interesting.” She knew the chances of that were slim indeed. Day followed night followed day on the ship, with nothing changing at all. Wind and water. Water and wind. The men doing the things sailors did.

Mikelo agreed, so together they left their cabin and climbed the wooden ladder to the upper deck. At first glance everything looked the same as ever. It took her a minute to locate Kral and Donial, but finally she spotted them at the bow, leaning over the edge. A loose shirt flapped over Kral’s muscular torso, nearly covering the wounds there. Donial, a year younger than Alanya, looked small compared to Kral, but with his black hair and dark eyes he almost resembled the Pict more than he did his fair-skinned, blond, blue-eyed sister. She and Mikelo joined them.

“What are you doing here?” Alanya asked.

Kral turned to her, windblown and bronzed darker than ever by his time on the ship. His chest was bare, and the wound left there by the pirate captain Kunios was scabbed over and red. “Out there,” he said. “Look straight ahead.”

She looked. Water.

“What?” she asked.

“Look harder,” Donial urged. “You’ll see it.”

She looked again. Water. But at the edge of it, perhaps a darker strip. “What is . . . ?”

“Stygia,” Kral answered. “That, lady, is Stygia.”

One of the sailors overheard and rushed to the bow

himself. After a quick glance, he smiled, clapping Kral on the shoulder. Then he turned back toward the rest of the ship and cupped his hands to his mouth. “Land ho!” he shouted.

The call was picked up, echoed by others all across the vessel. “Land ho! Stygia off the bow!”

“At last,” Kral said quietly. “Stygia, at last.”