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Senior Projects Spring 2024

Bard Undergraduate Senior Projects

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Spring 2024

## Ascopaesthesia

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ASCOPAESTHESIA

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Languages and Literature  
of Bard College

by

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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2024

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## Dedication

This is dedicated to Alex Benson and Ingrid Becker, without whom this would not have been possible.

As well as to Benjamin Hale and Dinaw Mengestu, who were both invaluable in setting me on this path.

Sincerely,

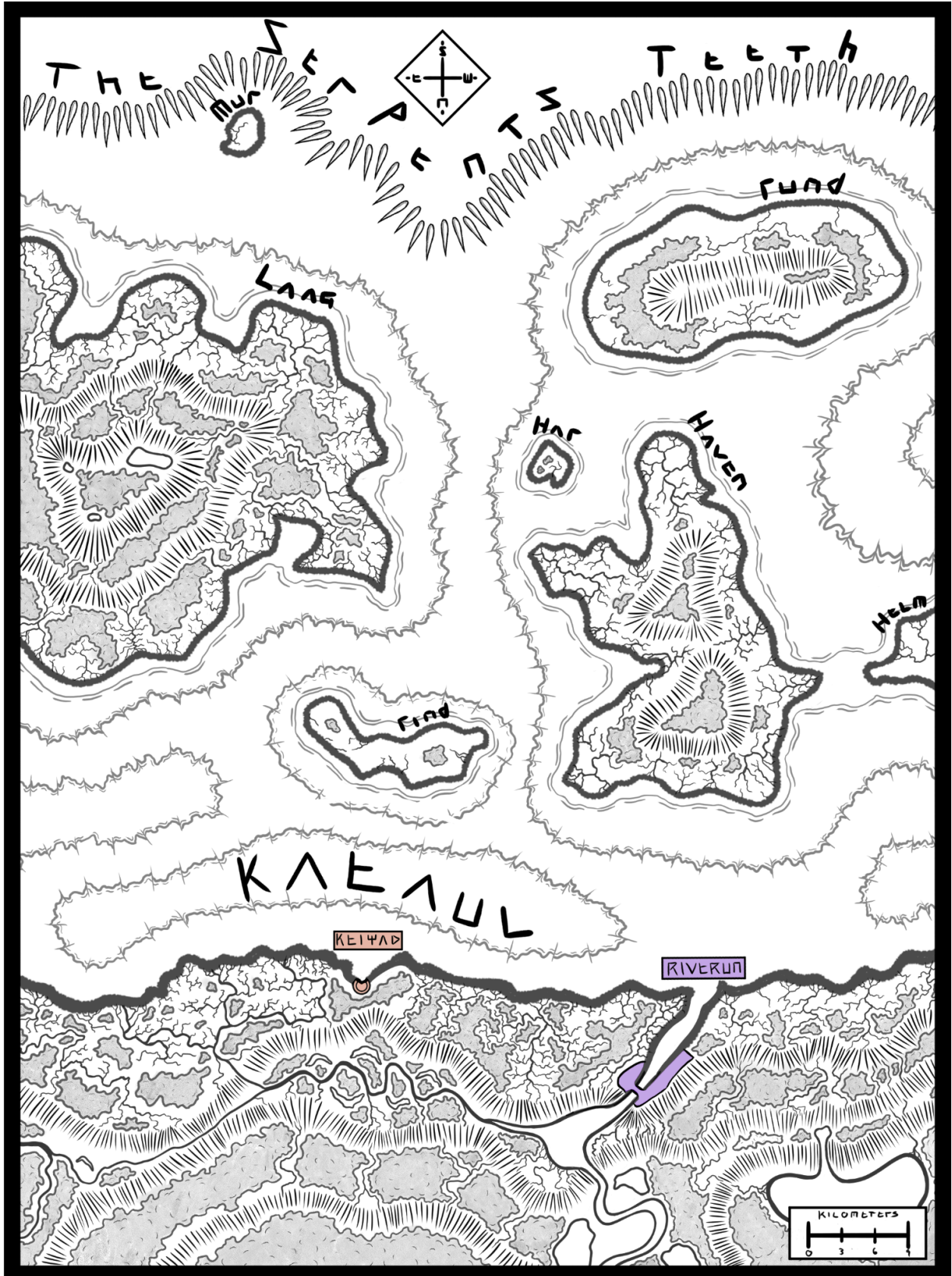
Will

Scopaesthesia

(noun, pathology)

The claimed extrasensory ability to detect being watched.

Also known as the 'psychic staring effect'.



## Chapter 1

### The Fourth Millennium

Year 144

*There are no rocks in Kaeaul.* Tarr thought to himself in the moment before the ground exploded underfoot.

The last thing he heard before disappearing under the brine was the *crack* of a handcannon. The last thing he saw were a pair of glassy orbs eyeing him through the lenses of his helmet. Then the surf filled his ears as he rushed through the water and struck silt. The wind was driven from his chest and the brackish tide flowed into his helm.

It was a foolish mistake for the hunter to put his boot in a hole like that. Especially one with a half dozen years service to the Guild of Keiyad. Now here he was, in the shallows and having his skull bashed against the inner wall of his helm. Then it lifted him by the head and slammed him back into the ground.

Black fuzz danced in his eyes and rang between his ears. There was a clamp fixed about his face and a sensation like his head had been caught between a hammer and anvil. He stabbed, and the steel point of a thick-spined dagger burst up through the surface to dance between carapace into deeper flesh. A violent hum cut through the water and rattled his bones as it screeched but did not let go.

Instead it thrashed him through the murk by his head as if to rip it from his neck. He fought despite the throbbing pain in his teeth, clenching even though his jaw would not shut. It felt as if a bar of iron had been lanced through his cheeks and now pressed cold against his gums. The waves sloshed back and forth across his face, washing copper down his throat and up his nose.

His grip tightened around the dagger as he kicked at one of its legs. A knee buckled and it lurched down into the bog before rearing up and pulling him into the torrential rain. In the air he could both hear yelling, and glimpse his foe; an arthrid clad in green and yellow, black eyes blank below the visor of its shell. It was larger than he, with a plated head, torso, and barreled abdomen. Its six limbs splayed out into the brine, broad and many-jointed.

It brought Tarr down under the water. A fresh burst of pain pushed through him as he stuck the mud once, twice, thrice, and then again before he freed the blade from its neck. He jabbed at its head as he struck the ground another time. The point glanced off the ridge of a socket, drawing a rent across its helm-face. Then it pulled him out, rearing on four limbs to dangle him above its crested face. He brought his arm up, then down with all the force he had left.

And the dagger leapt into its eye.

## The Fourth Millennium

Year 151

*I boarded the Ossaeon well before the light of dawn. The ship was a square faced, wide bowed hunting sloop with a broad deck and hull planked in tarred wood. A wash of copper paint*



*marked its waterline and furled against its forked mast were grey sails. The red flag hanging at the bore the image of a thorned vine.*

*Town was still and wet from yesterday's rain. The tide was on its way out and the nightfog had yet to clear from the streets. The waterfront was lively, unloading the few haulers that had moored in the hours before the day traffic.*

*Goss joined me at Stonedraught for a light meal before we walked to the docks. The tavern was quiet and sparse. I ate quickly. We hadn't taken more than a few steps back out the doors and onto the stones of the ring-harbor when we were waved down by a crew near the middle.*

*I was met by the captain, a broad-shouldered and silver haired hunter by the name of Laed, who showed us aboard. Not including Captain Laed, the crew numbered eight in total. Of the eight, three were ship crew, and the other five were hunting crew. Four of the hunters were sleeping below deck. The fifth was in town, running an errand.*

*The ship crew was up and greeted us once we boarded. In the nest was the Hand, a bright eyed young man by the name of Gerrel. The Warden of the Ship was a sharp featured sailor by the name of Dosghru, who stood shorter than Laed. The Helm was manned by Kabehehn, a longtime friend of the Captain who kept to her post at the wheel beneath the tent.*

*The four had met while learning the sail in the far south, on the isle of Mur. They were stationed in Plaqlhold holding open the gates through the serpents teeth to the Kharmourne Sea. When Laed officially became a Hunter-Captain, they returned to Keiyad in service of the Guild, where they have remained since R4.145. They, as well as the hunting crew, are to be our escorts for this expedition.*

*Dosghru showed Goss and I to the cabin and pressed us to seek rest before we were underway. Goss made an attempt, but I was already up for the day. Ferisen arrived just before the sky began to lighten. He seemed more annoyed than usual, expressing to me his gratitude that the hunters were still asleep. I know Ferisen to be crotchety and less than personable with the guild, but on this ship it seems exaggerated threefold.*

*I asked if he had worked with this crew before. He has not.*

The harbor was full by the time dawn manifested behind the grey sky. Traffic followed the piers curve, drifting in from the foggy water and unloading onto the stonework before leaving out the opposite side. All were careful to avoid the central pillar, which rose well above the tides.

Laed was waiting on the edge beside their ship, dressed in a hooded cloak the color of rich soil and trimmed with yellow. Beside them stood two similarly garbed figures. One wore the same shade of brown as Laed but trimmed in green. The other, who was tall and thin, wore grey.

In brown was Doehen, a stoutly built, dark haired and stiff bearded man with tan eyes. Or rather ‘eye’. He wore a patch over his left, which obscured part of the twinned scars winding across his forehead and temple. Doehen was the Guildmaster of Keiyad, a position he had held since the early 130’s. A bag hung under his visible eye, and his brow weighed heavily on his face as if reaching towards the fur of his cheeks.

In grey was Hasgal, well awake and iron-eyed. Her mantle was pinned to the right of her chest by a silver brooch made in the shape of a feathered pen and inkpot. The quill’s emerald point was framed by the well when clasped as if dipping into a vial of liquid silver. A cartographic analyst by trade, she had led the Holt of Keiyad as Chief Archivist for twenty years.

The two were an unusual pair of colleagues given how they saw eye to eye more often than those they represented.

All three scanned the crowds, searching for the last hunter in Laed's crew. He had run off to the leatherworkers for a case that had been requested last week. At Doehen's behest the order was expedited, as the call to expedition came about suddenly. Hasgal had received letters from Riverun contained unforeseen findings, so Doehen needed to push his hand and assemble a crew unexpectedly.

They did not wait long. He appeared from the clamor of dockworkers and guild officials scattered across the harbor. He wore a cloak identical to Laed's and carried a long-barreled rifle in a case slung over his shoulder. Laed greeted him with a wave, which he returned. His name was Roan, and he had been hunting on board the Ossaeon for the last half decade.

Doehen spoke first.

"Thank you for being here this early. I apologize for how sudden this came up." The heavy bass of his voice was rife with morning lethargy.

"I echo his sentiments. The Holt thanks you for escorting our surveyors."

Hasgal spoke next, her own voice a few shades colder than the Doehens.

The news from Riverun could not be ignored by the Guild, even though they acted otherwise. She had learned that nothing seemed to kill their mood quite like being told what to do, as if allergic to any plan but their own. *It must have been an impulsive two centuries before we started keeping track of things.* She thought to herself.

"Glad to work with your people as always." Laed sent a pair of polite nods to both the guildmaster and chief archivist. "I believe we are ready to set off."

“I believe you are.” Hasgal sent a glance up towards the deck of the ship behind the hunter-captain. “The 4140 chartings have been loaded.”

The four stood in silence for a few moments, broken by a lone *clap* from Doehen. Roan glanced down the side of the stonework at the water.

“How are they?” Doehen asked him.

“Moving again.” Roan answered.

Hasgal leaned and looked over the edge, then weighed in. “You should leave while they are still with you.”

What remained of Doehen’s left eye rolled below its patch. *Sure as the tides will flow shall the Holt inflict its thoughts upon the world.* Idly he wondered if the archives themselves would burst into flames should they not comment on even the smallest of matters.

But the guildmaster could not disagree. The four exchanged a round of farewells and handshakes. Laed felt a slip of paper press into their palm when they shook with the guildmaster. Their eyes met, and Laed curled their fingers in as they drew back from the handshake, crumpling it in a light fist.

Then the two hunters boarded the ship and pulled up the gangplank. Once they drifted back from the pier, Laed sent out a sharp whistle. A dozen meters overhead, Gerrel stood from his nest. It was halfway up, where the mast split from a single pillar into two yards that arched up and out to the sides. Grey sails were tied against them, with a third coiled into a line between the tips.

Gerrel ran up the left yard and jumped for the line, grabbing it in the middle where the sail was thickest. Then he hung upside down, his tail holding him fast while he untied the rope. Roan skittered up the mast, quickly making his way to where the yards split and untied the side

sails while his own tail looped through the railing of the nest he stood on. Below was Dosghru, who caught the lashings as Roan threw them down and began to set the rigging.

Laed looked down at their closed fist, and sat down against the bannister. They glanced around, taking stock of the other crew on deck. Beside the three by the mast, only Kabehehn was up in the misty air. She was at the helm, guiding Ossaeon towards the western end of the harbor. Slowly their hand opened. In it was a square of twice folded paper. Unfurled it barely covered their palm. The inside bore two lines of stiff, squared handwriting drawn by a scratchy pencil.

IF THE HOLT IS RIGHT ABOUT THIS, WE 'LL NEED A LANDING POINT.

IF THEY ARE, FIND ONE BEFORE THEM.

Laed's tail curled into their palm and flipped it over. The back had only four words.

I HOPE THEY 'RE WORTH.

*Date :: 1/2/9*

*Year :: R4.151*

*This tablet shall serve as the official documentation medium for the Holt of Keiyad during the oncoming expedition. Our task is to survey isles in the west mass of the Kaeaul Formation with intent to confirm the appearance of new or developing constructs. Guiding this are the chartings from the previous survey (conducted in R4.140).*

*Focus will be restricted to seven isles, broken into three blocks: The North Isles, The East Isles, and Isle South. Of most concern is a potential bridge between North [A] and Isle South.*

*Crew estimations place total survey length at five days.*

*Holt personnel number three, and include Eaehe (myself) serving as field scribe, Ferisen as survey leader, and Goss as transcriptive cartographer. We have been attached to a hunting*

*team under the command of Captain Laed. The sails were lowered after dawn, placing landfall tentatively in the early evening.*

*Moving forward, this expedition will be designated 'West-Mass Survey 4151'.*

Leather casing snapped shut and Eaehe slipped the tablet into her sidebag, tucking the mission log beside a row of pencils. She sat quietly in the flickering lantern light, listening to the creaking of wooden walls. The cabin was squarish, with room for a dozen to stand. Against one side was a kitchen, crowned by a coal burning stove top with two recesses for pots. A metal chimney stuck out from the back and punched through the hull.

The table Eaehe sat at was fixed to the middle of the room, as were the low-backed chairs surrounding it. She made to stand, keeping a grip on the woodwork as the boat rocked gently beneath her feet. Everything was nailed down, bolted either to the floor or to the walls like the rows of bunks opposite the kitchen. There were nine in total, of which six were occupied. In the lowest was Goss, who had finally managed to fall asleep. Ferisen laid in the one above him and snored loudly. So too did four hunters.

The ship crew was active up on the deck. A steady drizzle fell from above, dripping down the mast and yards onto the floor. Kabehehn steered from the helm while Laed and Dosghru kept the breeze in the sails. Gerrel sat in the nest above, his cloak wrapped tight around him to ward off the mist.

Eaehe leaned against the banister, looking off the right side into the heavy fog. It shrouded the mainland, reducing it to a dark blot from which rose smoky pillars. Each billowed from a great bonfire along the coast, every one signifying a beacon. To those at sail they revealed bends and curves in the shoreline. To those on land they served to dot the roads leading away

from Keiyad. Off the left side was open marsh, flecked with patches of mist but clear enough to see through. Far off in that distance was a thick band of cloud melting into the sky, like a white wall at the edge of sight. They were not approaching it yet, as their route took them west to the seventh beacon before turning south.

At a gap in the bannister sat a fifth crewmember, silent and motionless, watching the southern horizon flow like an inverted waterfall. His legs were crossed below a brown cloak as if it were a blanket. Beside him was a box and a bucket. In his hands was a fishing pole that cast a line into the glassy water.

“Good morning.”

The hunter did not respond for a second. Then he peeked up at Eaehe from under the hood of his cloak. He was a long faced young man with flaxen hair and sandy fur on his cheeks.

“Hello.” His voice was polite, but quiet and distant.

“I am Eaehe.”

Again he waited. “I am Roan.”

“Well met.” She nodded. As did he.

Then he turned back to the distant fog. “Same.”

“What are you fishing for?” Eaehe asked, glancing into the wooden bucket beside him. It was filled with little round-bodied, shelled creatures. They each bore three jointed legs and a single eye atop a stalk. He waited a few beats before answering.

“Eventually something large. But I need baitfish.” He shifted where he sat. “I’ve rigged an angling hook. Hoping for some greens.”

Time passed in comfortable silence as the ship sailed through the marsh with a steady pace. Smoke continued to rise through the starboard sky as they passed the first, then second

beacons. Each curled lazily upward, swirling where they met the thick grey blanket overhead. The cloudwash flowed like a tide of its own: a sea above the rest of the world.

Suddenly the line dipped down, a pull running from the water to his hands. Quickly he hopped to his feet and yanked upward, lifting it above his head. Eaehe stood too, hand outward. Roan passed her the haft and reached for the line. He grabbed the braided rope and reeled it up while Eaehe collected it into a pile behind him. Soon the catch appeared, thrashing at the surface before Roan pulled it over the side.

He snatched it from the air, holding the mossy fish in one hand while he pulled the hook free from its lip with his other. It was thick around the middle, with small scales and round fins along its tapered body. Its head was snoutlike and bony, with two little tendrils that reached from paired nostrils at the end of its plated maw. They wavered while the creature's mouth snapped an array of teeth at Roan. He held the fish against the banisters ledge while he reached for a blackwood handle with twisted grain. The twin rows of scaling along its back were grey as stone, and scraped dully against the woodwork.

*"Some kind of ridgeback..."* Eaehe assessed.

It flapped in his hand, reaching with each flex to nip at his fingers, writhing viciously for a taste of the hunter's blood. Roan drew a thin bladed knife from his hip, and delivered a stiff jab behind the eye of the fish. It stilled immediately, and he followed up with a cut at the base of its tail fin. The catch was as long as his forearm and boasted a double row of scutes on the topside.

Named for their armored spines, they are a common sight in rocky, weedy shallows. Long bodies and broad fins propel them through the marshtides, and olivene scaling lends them towards the ambush. Deep and wide jaws crack the larval shells of young arthids, and the needles within grant purchase in the flesh of smaller fish.



“I think it’s a green.” He commented, bringing the knife to its back. Roan cut into one of the scutes, shaving away a thin slice of keratin. Beneath the matte grey it glimmered like polished stone, sparkling in the overcast light and colored like the deepest green of the forest.

Eaehe nodded at the glittering gemscale. “Try the other side.”

The hunter shrugged, and took a shallow slice from the opposite row. This one shone like marshwater, richly dark and gleaming. It was neither green nor blue, instead a mix of both. Its color wavered, seeming to lean greener further down as if hiding below still water.

Roan cut the fish to pieces, hewing its flesh into chunks and separating the rows of scutes. Its flesh went into the wooden bucket at his side overtop the shelled creatures. The scutes went into a drawstring sack tucked beside the bucket, save for the two he had cut to see their color. He flicked the green one up and over the side, offering it back to the marsh. He did not have lacquer to cover the scale, so it would discolor back to stony grey within hours. Then he passed the blue-green one to Eaehe, who pocketed it. It was a rare specimen given its asymmetrical coloration.

Roan set a strip of fish on the hook and cast his line back out into the water.

## Chapter 2

Year 144

The trion serpent drew back and up, glaring with bulbous eyes. Its beaked jaws screamed through the rain as Fehn closed the distance. She held her greathook in both hands, the sickle headed polearm gleaming in the stormlight. Already it had claimed the shells of several that day, and dripped with greenish-yellow fluid. Suddenly its beaks snapped shut and it lunged at her like a spring.

The blow glanced off her breastplate, deflecting the serpent into the water. The strike nearly knocked Fehn on her back, but she dug her heels into the silt and pushed, throwing herself after it. Now she crashed against the foe, driving her shoulder into its back and sending it under the bog. It writhed, churning the surf in a circle around her. A many finned tail lashed sideways, flicking at her head from out of the brackish tide. She dove, and instead of swatting her skull off her shoulders, the coil smashed into her side.

Fehn caught a glimpse of Tarr, running full tilt toward her.

Then she hit the ground again and rolled, clawing at the mud to pull her to a stop before leaping to her feet. She swore behind the glass-lensed helm, for it had knocked the hook out of her hands. The thrashing of water filled her ears as the serpent corkscrewed through the shallows, jaws locked into a spearhead. She slid her legs out and ducked as it sailed overhead.

Fehn looked around wildly as it circled back for another strike, but her weapon was nowhere to be seen. Tarr was almost there, just a few strides from her with his own hook drawn. Fehn watched one of his steps falter and lurch, as if stepping into a hole.

An earsplitting *CRACK* rang out as two arms erupted from below and slammed into the sides of his helmet. Then the water exploded around him as an arthrid leapt out of the bog, bursting into the rainy air. A nefarion, long legged and shelled in muddy plating, had its mandibles locked tight around his face. Fehn jolted forward to him, only to catch an ear-ringing strike in the small of her back.

Though cast down, the plates of her armor held against the trion serpent. Her tail curled around the hilt of a push-dagger at her belt while she got to her feet and turned. The serpent was already upon her, lashing a coil down at the hunter. Her gauntlet closed around the weapon. The end of its hilt braced against a lug on her forearm, moreso an iron spike than a blade.

It lunged forward again, tri-jaw snapping. She turned away from it, letting the chitinous beak skitter across her shoulder. Then she struck, twisting and whipping a spiked fist across her body. The iron needle punched straight through its neck, cleanly flying past the serpent's own plating until Fehn's knuckles rested against it. Its body snapped downward, dragged by its piercing until the great nail landed in the silt underfoot. Its coils lashed around her, grating with a dozen toothed fins.

The nefarion shook Tarr like a doll behind her. It wrestled him below it and reared up before driving him into the ground. Then his hand burst to the surface, and drove a blade into its neck. It thrashed him again as a violent buzzing ripped through the air.

Fehn brought her boot down on the serpent's head, once, twice, and finally a third time that sent a *crack* rippling up her leg. Its coils fell limp, and she tore the spike from its back, throwing it off her and surging through the water.

## Year 151

Roan curled a finger under the gill plate of a ridgeback and lifted it out of the bucket. With hook in hand he stuck the fish's mouth on the end, piercing both jaws. He gave it a tug and cast his line. Roan had pulled up a number of them in the hours he'd been trying to. Only the first had blue-green scutes, but he kept many for bait.

Minutes passed before the line pulled on the rod. Roan yanked upward to set it, but felt nothing. He hissed under his breath and reeled back in. His hook was bare. The tackle was ill equipped to land whatever was biting. He reasoned it was about time to switch rigs, and glanced over his shoulder. For a moment his eyes stopped on the rack of spears beside the mast. Perhaps he would have more luck were he to throw one.

Running his hand along the line, he brought the end of it up to his face. The rope he used could stay, but not the hook. Though wickedly sharp, it was small, which was perfect for the baitfish he had been catching. To land something big while away from the shallows and out on the water he needed gear with more heft.

He sat beside the wooden crate next to him, flicking its iron latch with his tail tip and opened the top. Its hinges squeaked as the lid revealed an array of implements, lines, and lures. He selected a double-bitted angling hook bearing inward barbs on each point. From the eye atop the shank to the rounding of the two bends, this one measured a hair larger than his palm, and sat coldly in it. Forged of black iron, its hooks curled inward, large as his fingers.

The knot binding the smaller hook was well tied, and took some prying to loosen. Roan bit back the temptation to cut it off, for he knew it would be far more frustrating to tie with a frayed end. He also did not wish to needlessly harm well-crafted rope.

Eventually it came free. He placed the hook into the box and shut the top. His tail flicked the latch shut while he threaded the line into the larger hook's eye. After passing it through, he wound the end up and around itself, then down through a curl where the hook and rope met. Finally he sent the free end through the new loop and pulled it tight. The knot slid down to the eye, settling into a neat series of coils. Placing both fingers on the bends, he pulled, testing the rope and line with a little force.

Then he cast it back out, adorned with scraps of white flesh.

After holding a westward course for hours, Kabehehn spun the wheel while the crew set upon the rigging. The mast groaned as the yard turned to catch the breeze, clinging to the once-downwind while their course shifted south. Behind them the dark blot of mainland shifted until it came to rest behind the ship, then faded into the haze. Ossaeon pointed to the white wall and began picking up speed.

For a time, silence reigned in the marsh. The mist grew thinner the further back land drew, until the air was clear. The water was dark and glassy, flowing smoothly around the hull, drinking in a light rain. Behind the clouds lurked the faint tinge of a blue pale as a ghost of the sea.

Then the silence was broken by the sharp creak of a wooden pole.

Roan's eyes grew wide, and he moved to brace a foot against the bannister. The fishing rod curled like a sickle towards the water, its line taut. Dosghru rushed over and reached for the

pole, then dragging it towards the center of the ship. Roan let go of it, and lunged for the tented rack of spears by the mast. Gerrel had noticed the commotion, and dropped from above to stand beside Dosghru. Eaehe too joined them, and the three began to draw the line in by hand.

They struggled with the weight, working to keep it from going back overboard while Roan stepped over the side of the ship. His tail looped around a post of the bannister, pulling him to the side of the hull. Now he 'stood' just above the fog-shrouded water, spear in hand and eyes locked where the line cut into the marsh.

Suddenly a mass of grey and green-brown burst upward, thrashing at the surface. It was huge and strong-built, easily larger than a grown adult and boasting a gaping, toothed maw. From the end of its plated head sprouted a dozen writhing serpents, all coiling around the line trailing from the corner of its mouth. The great fin ending its tail broke into the air, throwing up a wave that drenched Roan where he hung from the railing-post. Thick teeth with glass-sharp points snapped towards his face with a sound like flat rocks being smashed together.

Eaehe, Dosghru, and Gerrel heaved the beast upwards. They dragged its snout toward the deck, leaving its furious body to maul the fog and water. Roan pulled his arms back, fixing his gaze where the edges of its head and back plates met. He lunged forward, snapping his arms out and driving the spear into its side above the foremost fin. The iron spike bit deep, lodging itself firmly behind the creature's gills. Its wide mouth flew open at Roan, reaching for any stray limbs.

He levered it away from him, letting its strength bleed into the marsh while it ascended. Roan tore the spear free as it crested the railing gap and lifted himself up. Dropping the weapon, he crawled over the side and landed on the planks. His catch flopped on the floor, which creaked under the new weight. Its motions were quickly losing the strength they once held, and slowly it fell stiller and stiller, until the only indication it lived was the sluggish open and close of its maw.

Laed and Kabehehn soon appeared to take a look, the latter finally leaving her wheel for a moment. Eaehe, Dosghru, and Gerrel were all content to sit with their backs to the mast and catch their breath. Roan chose to lay against the bannister.

The body of the fish was long and cylindrical, tapering to a rounded and paddled tail. Olive fins ran along its spine and down its underside, rippling and flicking water about. The rough texture of its armored skull scraped against the floor as the beast shifted, awkwardly lunging for errant feet.

Its head alone was as long and wide as Roan's torso, and doubtless heavier. The dozen coils sprouting from the end of its mouth now looked more like scaled worms than serpents. Its face appeared chiseled from slate-grey stone, formed of flat angles, harsh ridges, and plates fused solid. Black eyes sat deep in armored sockets, shielded by the ragged edges as if peeking out through cracks in a wall.

A sharp whistle from Kabehehn drew one more twitch of its tail, which smacked against the deck with a final wet slap.

For hours the tanglemaw hung from the yard by its tail, dangling and motionless. By Roan's guess it had swam the marsh for just under two years. Slow and purposeful hunters, tanglemaw dwell low in the water, gliding over weedbeds in search of prey. While known to swallow their meals whole, they boast a pride and confidence in the might of their stony jaws and peg-like fangs.

Eaehe held one of her rulers to its face, first measuring the length between the back of its skull and its eye, then from the eye to the end of its snout. Her tail curled around the wooden

ruler and held it between the top and bottom of its upper jaws. She reached for the charcoal leaden pencil coiled further up on her limb, and jotted down a few numbers.

In the other hand was her notebook. Unlike the log-tablet with its leatherbound casing and predetermined headers, this was far smaller, set in string and bindings rather than clamped to a board. These notes were her own, deemed '*mission non-essential*' and thereby '*not of guild relevance*'.

She frowned. Then she flipped through, glancing at the previous two pages of measurements. Save for the distance between its eye and snout, not much was out of the ordinary given the age estimated by the crew. And even then, it was only strange by a few small measures.

“Record keeping?” Roan’s voice manifested over Eaehe’s shoulder. She fought to keep from jumping at the hunters sudden presence, and turned to face him.

“I am.” She flipped to the foremost empty page, pencil at the ready. “Anything you find important?”

Roan fell silent. His gaze turned to the fish on the yard, looking it up and down.

“Just that it's a large one.” He reached up to grab at the fins. There were two on each side, in pairs that flanked its head behind the neck. The lower fins were broad and rounded, fanning out from a stout, muscley limb. The higher sets were similar, but drawn to a point rather than a disk.

“Pectorals are round on adults.” He pinched the tip of the upper fin, pulling it down and away from the body. “This one was getting there.”

“Yet it still has *room to grow*.” Eaehe responded, scratching a few words onto the paper. “At least judging by skull proportion.”



She would have to check *records of fin development*. If Keiyad's archives didn't have any, the Holt of Riverun might.

Roan's eyes narrowed, locked on the back and top of the jaws. It seemed longer at the front than an individual of its size should be. Tanglemau were known for broad snouts; juveniles grew out of their narrowish skulls quickly and steadily. By all knowledge its head *should* be done growing by now, but already it weighed more than most of its kind.

The white wall that once loomed on the horizon now towered overhead, hanging like a curtain. Curls of fog reached up from the marsh as if drawn to meet the sky, flowing like a wave trapped in amber. A tension lingered about the crew as they waited for the Captain's signal.

"Roan, Gerrel!" Laed yelled.

The two skittered up the mast while Laed strode briskly to where one of the sidesails were rigged. Dosghru took their place at the other. The fog loomed closer and closer, rising higher above the ship with each second, until the tip of the prow was moments from it. Kabeehn let out a shrill, piercing whistle. At her mark, Laed and Dosghru loosened the rigging, giving the sails slack. Roan and Gerrel both pulled their ropes taut, furling the grey canvas against the yards.

Ossaeon dove prow first into the whiteness, lunging across the barrier and parting the fog like a sword. It swirled inward, pushing on and dragging at the mast with its tendrils. Even rolled tight, the sails snapped to billow, filling with mist and water.

Immediately it grew darker, and in seconds no one could see more than a dozen meters in any direction. Another whistle cut through the sudden haze, and the two up on the mast released

their ropes. Laed and Dosghru pulled hard, and drew them taut again. The already weak wind cut, and the ship lurched. In its place drifted a light breeze.

The wooden door below the helm creaked open, and Goss wobbled up into the wet air. He waved to Kabehehn, who waved back and watched him stagger across the deck with amusement. Soon he found his way to a bannister, and clung to it as he faced the gentle rocking of the ship.

It was a losing battle.

Laed quickly spotted him. The cartographer stuck out like a sore thumb, being the only one not wearing a cloak. Even Kabehehn wore one now. The air was still and heavy, soaked with fog that crawled down the lungs with each breath. Water beaded on every surface, and soon Goss' beard and mustache were sodden.

"Like drowning in air..." Eaehe muttered, keeping herself from inhaling deeply. That would have made the sensation worse.

"Breathe through your mouth." Laed answered, their eyes scanning what little of the haze they could see through.

"Is it going to be like this the whole time?" Goss asked, fighting the sudden urge to take a deep sniff.

"Until landfall." The captain answered.

Goss sighed in what was supposed to be relief, but instead sneezed violently. It felt as if he had drawn water up his nose. Then he excused himself, and staggered back down into the cabin.

The ship settled and slowed as the speed that carried them across the marsh faded. The thickness dragged their progress to a crawl, wrapping around the hull and crew in a damp shroud.

Their wake swung out before them, sending a lone wave into the growing haze.

Sitting by the edge of the deck, Roan saw a fuzz blur the ships' far ends. Then he turned his gaze from the prow and back to his tackle. He undid the knot around the hook and placed it back in the crate, selecting one of comparable shape and size. This one also bore a double bit, but was made of bars rather than curves. Wicked points twisted from the ends, more akin to thorns than barbs.

Then he tied it to the line, set a ridgeback head upon the iron caltrop, and cast it into the fog gathering atop the water like a second skin.

## Chapter 3

The enveloping haze blurred at Ossaeons edges, such that Gerrel could see nothing. The fogwash melted into cloud at every angle and stacked endlessly overhead. Turning upward, he suddenly felt as if his eyes were dunked in milk. He blinked the water away. Talk had died down on board, and the crew ran the ship with nary a word. The stillness reigned for what felt like hours to Eaehe, even though both Kabehehn and Laed seemed confident it had only been one or two.

Eventually a new sound broke the reigning silence. A set of bumps then a creak, though not from the mast or yard or rope. The cabin door had opened, a noise followed by boots thumping onto deck and accompanied by an arrhythmic hum. It was one of the hunters, cloaked and armored in a set of broad, lacquered plates known as ‘lignothorax’. The smooth faces had wear and scuffing on them, and sat overtop a worn but densely padded suit.

“Afternoon Fehn!” Kabehehn greeted the hunter as she emerged into the mist. “What are you doing up here so early?”

The hum stopped as Fehn turned to the helm. A grin split her round face, crinkling the white line that cut through her left brow to the ear.

“I’d heard we were in Kaeaul,” Her sharp voice cut through the fog, “thought I’d get some fresh air.”

She paused and took a deep breath, then exhaled dramatically, bowing as if to roaring applause. A few claps poked back wisely.

Roan's eyes narrowed. His grip tightened. He could feel a hint of pulling on the fishing rod. Nothing came after, but he thought to try and set the hook regardless. He yanked upward and braced. For a second he wondered if he had snagged a rock. Then the rock shot away like a bolt. He called out to the crew, passing the line to Dosghru and Gerrel. Then he stepped over the bannister, this time without a spear in his hands. The line did not thrash in the water, and instead held a straight path out into the shrouded marsh.

The end of it soon burst through the fog, a mass of snapping jaws and thrumming paddles. Careful to avoid the mouths, Roan lunged toward it, snatching the grasping limb reaching from its front. It tore up the water, drenching Roan in marsh-cold for the second time that day. Still he kept his grip, both with his hands on the creature and with his tail again around the bannister.

He guided it as they hauled from above and dragged it over the side. Its biting head sported a great silvery beak, the lower half of which split into a pair of scything jaws. Soulless eyes bulged from the sides of its head and a third adorned the top of its face. The body was thickly shelled by a hull of moss-coated plate, and its abdomen was tipped by three stiff rudders. It writhed on the wooden flooring, bladed mouthparts snapping outward at the encircling crew. The pincer tipped limb sprouting from its hunched back reached outward, pinching at the boots of the crew. Dosghru and Gerrel piled onto its body and tail, restraining it as much as they could.

It was a bogreacher: aggressive arthruds that dwelt in the brackish murk between Kaeaul proper and the open marshes. They cruise the bog-bottom, gazing up through the dark water.

With their arms they snatch little prey out of the water, and cut larger quarries to shreds with their razored mandibles. On rare occasions they have been seen lurking at the surface, reaching from the water and fog to grab at anything they judge food.

Laed stepped forward and placed their boot firmly behind an eye, holding it still. Roan crouched above it and braced his against the top of its mouth, anchoring the jaw open. One of its lower mandibles was pinned beneath while the other swung back and forth. Fehn waited until its movement slowed, then grabbed it with her armored gloves and bent it wide before carefully tucking it behind her leg. She clamped it between the plates of her armor, keeping its edge away from her knee.

With its face held apart she reached in, careful to avoid its inner mouthparts. A dozen limbs rippled at the base of its maw like a cluster of rasping fingers. The hook was wedged clear of their reach, stuck firmly in the crevice of a side mandible. Unlike an angling hooks flesh-piercing barbs, the thorns of runic hooks embed in the membrane between shell plates or stick in the carapace itself.

Roans catch measured just shy of three meters from beak-tip to tail segment, which though expected was large. They still fought to hold it down while keeping it from striking. Five oblong paddles jutted from every face of its midbody, each flanked by wicked spurs. They vibrated in the air, sending forth a heavy buzzing that filled the ears of the entire ship.

Fehn grabbed the hook and pushed upward, unsticking the spikes, then working it from between the chitin until it was pulled free. She tossed it behind her, throwing the line away from any limbs it could snare should the rope snap taut.

“Call it.” Laed’s voice was loud and even.

Fehn squinted at it.

“Just shy of three meters.” Her gaze turned to its midsection. “All paddles, all eyes, grown arm.”

“Full coat, very green.” Roan touched the moss film spread across its carapace. It was so sodden that it bordered on slimy, *squishing* beneath his fingers.

“An adult.” Eaehe remarked, to which Fehn agreed.

Then the hunter wrapped her arms around the base of its maw. Laed and Roan allowed its mandibles to close slowly, letting Fehn carefully gather the jaws and clamp them shut with both hands. Once she had a firm hold around its beak, Laed motioned for Eaehe to grab its reaching arm. Dosghru and Gerrel held it by the abdominal shell and rudder segment, while Laed and Roan lifted it by the sides. Between the six of them they were able to manage its weight and size, and swiftly threw it over the side.

With a splash it vanished beneath the fog sea, and in seconds there was no sign it had ever seen the air.

Kaeaul was quiet, but not silent. Ossaeon crawled onward, creeping through the blindness that washed over the crew. An hour went by before Gerrel yelled down from the mast, calling as land appeared off the prow. Eaehe and Fehn ran to the bannister, with Laed right behind them. Barely peeking above the water was a patch of mud. Four could have stood on it shoulder to shoulder were it not bristling with stiff grasses. The mist parted around them, and they rattled in the darkening haze. Then it left sight, swallowed as soon as it had come to light.

Far off chittering drifted from the south. It tapped at the crew’s heads as if scratching their skulls. It was faint, little more than a tickle in the ear at first, but only grew clearer the farther they traveled. Land appeared and vanished in turn, each rife with stout reeds, each larger

than the last until they started to melt together. Soon Kabehehen was navigating twisted, winding paths through the isles. They sloped down from the ridges, arcing into the dropping tide.

Slowly it turned from ephemeral scritchings into a cacophony of chirps and buzzes echoing through the fog. Each held its own rhythm and cadence, binding into an ambiance that warbled overhead, flowing from all directions as if brooking answers from Kaeaul's murk. They repeated over and over, each call differing from the previous as notes and rhythms shifted by beats and half-tones. They were novel yet familiar, as if each were a distant childhood tune just on the edge of recollection.

The sound grew in strength and clarity as each small isle passed, until the crew were speaking through rather than over it. Slowly it began to fade as the tide started to roll back up the isles. One by one the calls stopped, matching the growing water between them until they had all but faded into the distance. Then it was quiet again.

What daylight remained slowly dimmed as afternoon passed to evening. It was a gradual change, the sky falling darker and darker until the night's gradient was upon the crew. Then it was black. One by one the lanterns flared to light, bathing the deck in a fiery glow.

*We set sail down the coast once port was behind us. The fifth western beacon passed us by mid-morning, and the seventh before noon. There we turned south towards Kaeaul. The wind came into our sails and we picked up speed, reaching the border with afternoon in full swing.*

Eaehe sat in an empty bunk below deck, etching a travel account into her tablet. The cabin was filled with the sounds of the crew making preparations. All the hunters were up and



about, donning armor, cleaning blades, or filling quivers. They did not bother her, and instead spoke calmly between themselves, chatting about the trip with those who had been awake.

*Roan (Captain Laed's second in command) hooked a tanglemaw out in the open marsh. I took the chance once it had been hung to take some measurements. It was not of a record breaking size by mass alone, but is exceptionally large given its age. Its top pectoral fin was still pointed, indicating it still had room to grow. Its snout was long, and narrower than the baseline. Dosghru (Warden of the Ship) remarked that it weighed 'perhaps a third more than it should'.*

*Passing into Kaeaul cut our speed down to a single knot, since which progress has moved at a crawl. The air grew heavy and wet, beading on and soaking anything. Breathing has become uncomfortable with how it sits in the lungs, and inhaling through the nose causes bouts of coughing.*

*Roan landed a bogreacher soon after crossing the border. It fought well and seemed normal enough. Neither I nor the crew noticed anything strange about it like with the tanglemaw. Captain Laed took the catch (and its healthy coat) as an official marker we were now in Kaeauls waters. Soon patches of land began to appear off the prow. Chirping has been in my ears since.*

*For hours we sailed blind through the fog. Compared to open marsh, visibility was terrible. At any given time I could see only about fifty meters in every direction, including upward. It was fortunate that we did not strike an isle given. We crossed between many, but at one the fallen tide had come by the time we reached it, and blocked the path with a mudflat.*

*Travel paused for a few hours while the waters sorted themselves out. By the crew's reckoning there was some time before nightfall, as the later afternoon light was with us even if beginning to fade. The gloam tide was on approach by the time we were able to move again. Our*

*course resumed, the ship sailing over a drowned mudflat with only a few scrapes on the bottom. Travel continued south as evening overtook day, signified by the continued darkening around the ship.*

*We passed through a channel and over another hidden flat as the gloam tide crested, and enjoyed a fish stew cooked up by the Warden. The tanglemaw became the main ingredient alongside jared roots in a mushroom stock. Though light on spices the bowl was hearty and filling. The fish's strong flavor was muted, which I owed to its freshness.*

*Eventually we reached our first destination, Isle North[A]. According to the Helm and her chartings, we are off the northern face right at the edge of its low-zone. I and four others plan to row to where the zones meet. There we shall set up camp above the ridge and spend a night on the centermass before survey operations begin in the morning. Joining me at landfall will be Ferisen, Roan, Fehn, and—*

A scratchy voice and tap on the shoulder knocked her out of her writing. “You’re with the Holt, right?”

The hunter, a pointy faced man with black hair, regarded her strangely. His eyes were precise, but vague like he was staring at everything in sight with equal attention. Sitting in his sunken cheeks were a pair of broad scars, as if many years ago an iron bar had been lanced through the sides of his mouth.

“I am.” She answered. The hunter was garbed in the same smooth-plated lignothorax as Fehn. His too had much wear on it. They said nothing for a moment, until a crooked smile bent around his face. Eaeche could see that he was missing a number of teeth behind his canines.

“Glad at least one of you has the right attitude.” There was some bite overtop his tone. He reached out a free hand. The other held a pile of leathers.

“Tarr.”

“Eaehe.”

They shook. His grip was wiry even below the bulk of his armor. His eyes focused as if dialing in on where she stood.

“You need more than that.” He pinched the hem of her grey cloak, then dropped the gear into her lap. Among them were a pair of tall boots with broad, flaring cuffs. Their tops melted into the hem of two pant legs the same earthen color as the footwear. The soles and their aggressive tread settled upright next to her. “Most of this rainhide should fit you. Let me know if any of it doesn't.”

Eaehe lifted the collar assemblage; a thick band of stiff leather fixed with two leaf-shaped plates. Its pieces were weather treated and smooth to the touch, held together by a set of corded ties. She rapped her knuckles against the pauldrons, which thumped dully like wood beneath the thin leathering. Save for that outer coat, it was made of the same composite as lignothorax, if slimmer and lighter.

“Thanks...” She started, but by the time she looked back up, he had vanished.

She dug through the pile to bring out the subsuit, a single layer with padded limbs and three sets of ties down the chest. Eaehe stepped into it, starting with the boots attached to the bottom of the legs then lacing it closed. It would keep the water out, a design pioneered in an age when breathing fresh air meant wading.

Then she found the tabard, put her cloak back on, and pulled it down over the hooded cape. It padded her torso, pulling the edge of the hood forward and forming it into a waistcloth.

The skirting layer came after, forming a second, shorter cape that hung to the small of her back. Next she threw the collar assemblage over her head, feeling the weights come to rest on her shoulders. Duroq hide was dense and heavy, but few other creatures were large enough to armor hunters in numbers the Guilds needed.

Finally were the gloves and faceguard. It was a mask that covered her face from the nose down, affixed to the suits high inner collar and hanging out past the hood. The gloves were snug and pliable, with large gauntlets that fit over the hem of the sleeves. The whole getup was heavier than her clothes, but everything fit.

Rainhide were lightweight, and born from the demands of mainland hunters who set out on long expeditions into the highlands. From their earliest forms in the second millenia, they granted favor and precedence towards stealth and comfort in the eternal showers across the Aostan River. It was only in the wake of the Last Flood that the armor saw newfound popularity with bog hunters, becoming prized for both its water retardance and ease of customization.

Eaehe was alone in the cabin, the hunters having readied themselves and gone upstairs. Quickly she set about securing her bags to the belt, then grabbed her satchel and made her way outside. Immediately water beaded on her, but she was dry and isolated from the cool air beneath the new layers. Like the cabin had been just minutes earlier, the upper deck was awash in sound and movement. While the crew milled about and kept busy, Eaehe found a spot at the bannister on the far end of the ship, and quickly returned to her tablet.

*I was unaware how poor visibility would be. Night fell hours ago, but the lanternlight has turned into an orange haze through the fog. Everything is fuzzy and awash in a bright glow. With no reference points out here between the isles I do not know what tide it is.*

*One of the rowboats hanging off the stern has been lowered into the water, and as I write they are loading it with supplies. While the landing party and I set up camp on the first isle, Captain Laed will (as is procedure) take the other hunters to scout some of—*

“Eaehe.”

With a huff she snapped the tablet closed and stowed her pencil. It was Ferisen, the expedition's iron-haired survey leader, stiff-faced as always. Like Eaehe, he was wearing a rainhide.

“Yes?” There was a blunted edge in her voice, but if Ferisen caught it he chose to ignore it. Instead he glanced to the wooden box in his hands, then to her.

“We’re about ready to go. Are you?” He raised an eyebrow.

“I’ve all my things on me.” Eaehe stood sharply, tucking the tablet away. She gave herself a few pats, feeling for the straps and pouches she wore overtop the rainhide. With their grey cloaks peeking through, both she and Ferisen clearly looked ‘of the holt’.

Everything seemed to be accounted for. Ferisen nodded, and started to make his way to the side where one of the landing craft had been brought around. He had a mace at his side and a wooden smallshield on his back.

Fehn and Tarr, decked in full armor, carried their arms. Fehn had a great hook strapped to her back and a broad-hilted dagger sheathed on her hip. The sickle blade of her polearm melted out of its talon-like head and flared into a handguard. Opposite the arcing spike was a modest hammer-face. Tarr sported a one handed pick and crossbow as well as a similar dagger. On his belt was a small bandolier filled with bolts feathered in blue and green.

All four were hooded, for the weather was turning. The mist had begun to fall, and now a steady drizzle trickled from the night overhead, running down their cloaks and tapping against the deck planks with a steady beat. Soon the landing boat was loaded, and on its floor were bedrolls for the party, a small box of fumesticks for warding, and two sacks. The larger was filled with firewood, the smaller with charcoals.

Soon they were approached by Laed and Dosghru, who themselves were trailed by Roan. The captain carried two weapons. One was a heavy bar mace; four flanged and capped with outward facing spikes. The other was a handcannon, with a curved wooden grip and black iron barrel. Its hammer was set forward and its opening plugged by a wooden puck. Dosghru carried two glass vials filled with a clear, reddish-brown liquid.

“Take these.” Laed held the weapons out to Eaehe. She slipped the pommel and handle of the mace up under her belt, then twisted it so it hung beside her. She tucked the handcannon behind her tabard, concealing it under her cloak.

“I take it you will be keeping watch tonight.” Dosghru handed a vial to Fehn and the other to Tarr. “This is the new stock from Riverun.”

They uncorked them. The liquid inside smelled of dry, astringent herb.

“*To the bogs.*” Fehn mumbled. Tarr repeated her words, and the two *clinked* their vials together, then downed the contents. Strongly bitter and pleasantly warm, it carried an undercurrent of malt and a distant sweetness. Their tails curled, and both made faces that scrunched the fur of their cheeks. They handed the empty glasses back to Dosghru, who took them down into the cabin.

“We’ll see you in the morning.” Laed bid them farewell, and returned to the helm where the rest of the hunters were gathered.

Roan stayed with the landing party.

“No lignothorax?” Eaehe asked. Of the hunters making landfall, he was the only one without full plate.

Roan shrugged, raising the leathers hanging around him. The collar of his rainhide sat loose around his neck and shoulders. Unlike her or Ferisen, he was without pauldrons. Instead there was a single dished plate facing outward from his right shoulder. His right leg and foot was wrapped in an iron brace with a padded cup for his knee.

On his back he carried a few days' rations, a bag and his rifle. The satchel at his side held two vials of powder and a small pouch of stoneshot. His weapon was slung over the other shoulder, its barrel covered with a wrap and tied in cord to stave off rust. In one motion he unslung the bag and dropped it into the boat, stepping in after. Eaehe followed, then Fehn and Tarr. Ferisen was the last to leave the ship.

“Try and keep this boat steady?” He grumbled as he stepped into it and set his crate down. “Not all of us enjoy rotting out here.”

“Hey hey!” Tarr smiled with his teeth. “He knows what we do!”

“That’s why we’re here. Sometimes things need to be written down rather than killed.”

“And that’s why *we’re* here,” Fehn’s tone was upbeat and chipper despite the cold look in her eyes, “to make sure you don’t get your head pulled off the second you touch dirt.”

She and Tarr took the oars, and the five spent their outing in silence.

Kaeaul’s blackness stretched out before them. By the lantern at the prow they could see the brackish surf lapping at the hull of the rowboat and the slope of the isle reaching up ahead. The party walked alongside the boat, guiding it up through the shallows.

The ground under the surface was smooth and sticky, broken only by patches of gnarled scrub. Eaehe strode over them, neck bent and eyes firmly fixed on her tablet. The lanterns glow hung over her shoulder, illuminating the pages as she walked and wrote. Woody stems and stiff leaves crunched underfoot, their scraggly tips barely peeking up through the brown, ankle high water.

*Something touched the hull as we neared the shore. Nothing came of it, and we made landfall smoothly. I stepped off moments ago, and am very thankful for the height of these boots. Even when the water was around my calves, they kept me comfortable.*

*I can feel the mud sticking to my soles. It's gluey, and pulls while I walk through it. Keeping my steps small and closer to a shuffle helps, but—*

Eaehe tripped, landing in the very edge of the water with a splash and thump.

*As I write I sit in the shorebreak, thankful the water is ankle height. The pants of this rainhide have protected me well enough, and beneath the layers I remain dry.*

*I must have kicked something. It felt like a rock, which does not seem right.*

“Eaehe,” Ferisen called out to the scribe, “you alright?”

“Am fine. Can you hold this?” She got to her feet as he neared her with the lantern, then passed her tablet to him.

“I tripped on something.” Eaehe gestured for him to raise his light, which he did. Now with the lantern focused, they could see what had sent her tumbling.



It looked like a matte rock, albeit one halfway buried in the mud. At Eaehe's behest, she and Tarr hauled it from the mud and rolled it out of the lapping water. It was an oblong, stout oval with two defined ends. At one side was a cluster of rocky nodules, and a three edged seam at the other, which aligned with the craggy ridges running across it.

"Arthrovalve." Eaehe muttered, taking her tablet back from Ferisen.

"A smaller one too." Tarr crouched down beside it, resting the tip of his hand-pick on the stony surface. "Good we didn't hit any on our way in."

*The tide had rolled out, leaving the mudflats between us and the shoreline. We set camp up the slope and over the ridge where the land was drier, carrying first our supplies and then hauling the boat up the lowzone so it would be clear of the water.*

*Tarr took notice of scattered tracks resembling plain holes spaced evenly in the earth. He pointed them out to me. He says he expects us to see a 'scuttler' in the morning light once the dawn tide falls.*

*Unlike the bare flats, the ridge was covered in stiff reedgrass. Fehn and Tarr cleared a swathe and set the campfire in the middle, and used the cut reeds to floor our sleeping rolls. Ferisen and I unloaded his survey chest. Both measuring posts were accounted for alongside a hundred meters of rope and spare pieces.*

*Fehn set a dozen fumesticks on poles around the perimeter and set them alight with the growing campfire. The thick incense-smoke would serve to ward off Kaeaul and let us rest in peace for the night.*

*Tarr and Fehn were set to take watch while Ferisen, Roan and I are sleeping.*

“How is the wakendraught treating you?” Fehn asked over the fire's low crackle. It had burnt down in the time since the rest of the party had fallen asleep, but with the two of them feeding it there was little fear of it going out. Even in the dampness.

“Good.” Tarr gazed at the ash gathering beneath the ember-ridden logs. He looked to his hand. It was shaking, slightly. “I feel awake.”

“Well you certainly look awake.” Fehn craned her neck to the side, feeling a couple of pops come from the bones.

“Kept awake, rather.” At his comment she let out a snort.

The lapping of water against the bank had long since faded into the distance. Low night was some hours behind them, but not so far that the tide was coming back in. At times they heard things down in the mudflat, tapping steps that skittered heavily between the scrubs. Every so often a stiff *crunch* reached their ears, followed by a grinding noise. Whatever was out there, it chose not to bother them, which the two watches appreciated.

Otherwise it was quiet, save for the creaking of the reedgrasses and distant chirps.

Fehn thought of Keiyad. From where they had made landfall on the north isle, town was little more than a dozen kilometers away, and tucked up in a cove along the coast. Beneath the foggy blackness in which she sat, it seemed further. Just this morning she had been walking through the streets, and now it would be half a week until she saw a building again. And until the ambient chirping was replaced with whispered talk.

Fehn did not relish leaving port before the true light of dawn, but she greatly desired a break from chatter. For days no one had been able to talk of anything but the *false thunder*, as it came to be known. The noise had been less a clap or boom, and moreso a low thrumming. It pushed at the eardrums of those outside, rattling doors and windows.

Everyone had heard it, everyone had felt it, and *it* had been the topic of choice for the last two weeks straight. Her gaze shifted from the campfire to the surrounding fumesticks. Miasma poured from them and flowed onto the ground, pushing away from camp. She reached beside her, and threw another log onto the low flames. They leapt up around it with a snarl.

“Do you think whatever made the noise is still out here?”

Tarr thought on Fehn’s question. Idly he was surprised the conversation hadn’t drifted here earlier.

“I still think it came from beyond the brackengard.” Tarr answered eventually.

“Hmmm.” Fehn mulled it over. “It *has* been some time since the last seastorm rolled in...”

“Not a seastorm.” Tarr contested. “It was too quiet and...steady, for thunder.”

“You think I should ask the scribes?” She glanced briefly at Eaehe and Ferisen, who slumbered below thin, treated linens. “I doubt they know anything we don’t.”

“If they did I’m sure we’d have heard it by now.” Tarr’s eyes rolled.

“I’ll ask them anyway.” Fehn scratched at the patch of fur arcing across her cheek. She knew well that Tarr would not be the one to ask the Holt anything. “Probably starting with the less grumpy one.”

They sat by the fire quietly, watching the orange consume the wood and flicker around the smooth bark of the logs. It popped and hissed in the drizzle, spitting sparks into the black air. The fumesticks burned around them, setting pungent waves outward from the camp and into the dark.

“Do you feel far?” Tarr piped up after some time.

“From what?” Fehn asked.

“From home.”

She considered her answers. Several came to mind, but one of them took centerstage.

“Isn’t that where we are?”

“That’s the spirit.” Tarr grinned like a skull in the firelight. Fehn cracked, and let out a short cackle before stifling herself. It was well towards midnight and the scribes were fast asleep. Kaeaul, on the other hand, was wide awake.

“I would feel nearer to home a thousand league past Riverun.”

Then it was Tarrs turn to laugh, though he did it silently and with his shoulders. Another silence grew before he spoke again.

“Are you going to Highdock soon?”

Fehn had not been to her birthplace in a long time. Highdock was far from Keiyad, and a challenge to reach. It was set on the shores of Lake Aost, right at the edge of the highlands, and accessible only by traveling upriver through the falls. It was a town that lent itself to leaving, as climbing back up to it meant hiking through great stretches of heavily forested land.

“Why would I do that?”

“...nostalgia?” He offered. Fehn waved his comment away. She did not think ill of Highdock. After all it was through their Guild that she learned of her calling.

“What about you? Any plans to visit Creek?” She asked despite knowing the answer. Creek was a small village downriver from Highdock, and where Tarr was taught to walk and hunt.

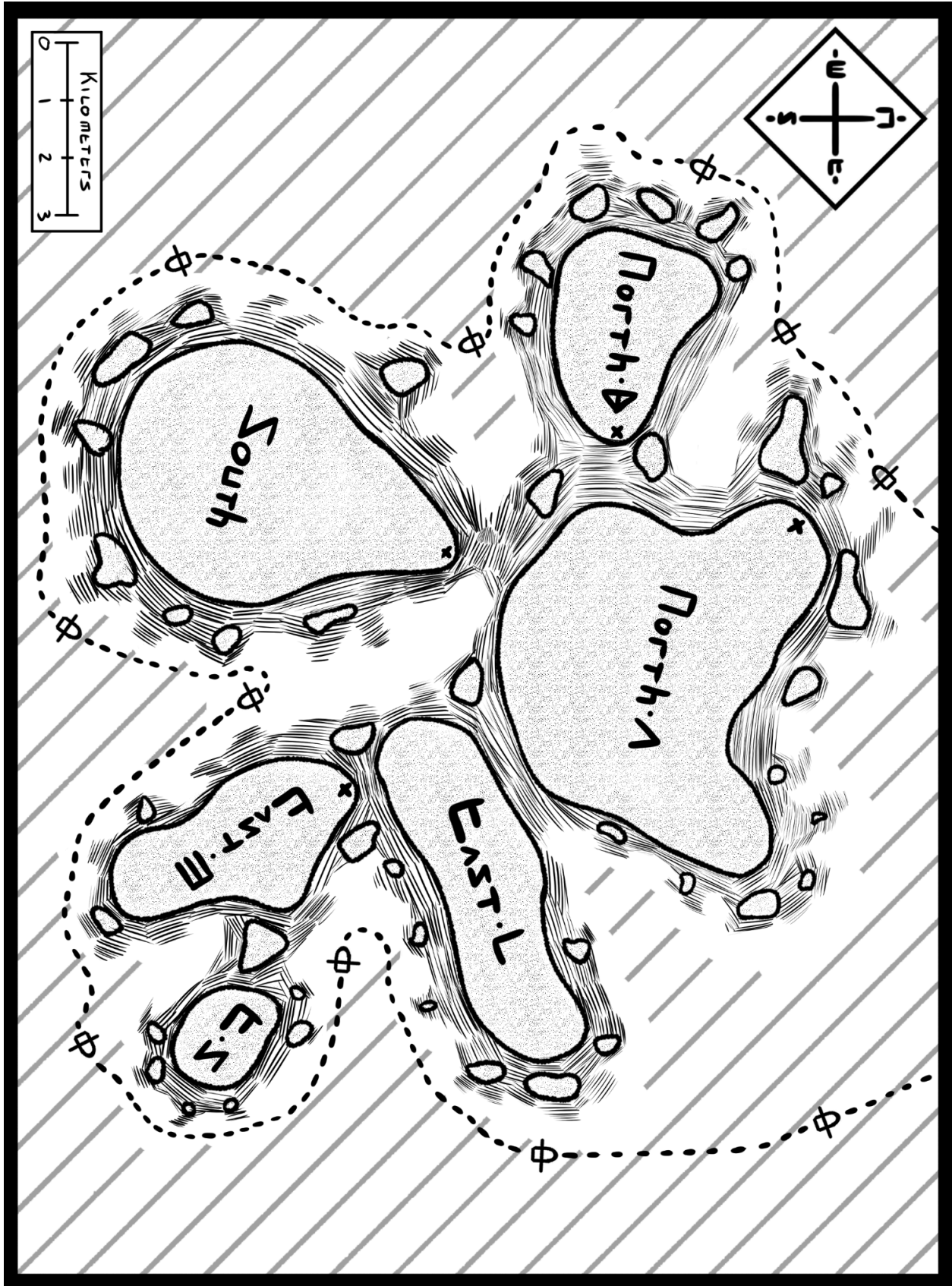
“So I can get run down by a pack of duroq? No thank you.” He scoffed dramatically. “An arthrid would make it quick.”

“I’m sure you could find one on the mainland that would oblige you.” Fehn rolled her eyes. Tarr snorted.

“Thanks for the reassurance.” He answered glibly.

A haze slowly diffused through the darkness. It began at the tide of low night a few hours before, but grew in intensity, if ever faintly. By the fire it was challenging to see, but the barest traces of violet had infused itself in the hints of light drifting down from the clouds overhead.

The drizzle began to let up as the tide slunk back in, leaving a still mist in its place. The rest of the night was calm and passed without note or event. The fire crackled gently, devouring logs as high night rolled back into the darkness. Soon the land began to brighten as dawn crept through the clouds. The violet hint in the air evaporated beneath an ambient morning glow as sight steadily returned to Kaeaul.



## Chapter 4

*Date :: 2/2/9*

*Year :: R4.151*

*Survey :: Day 1 of 5*

*By the time I awoke the dawn tide had already peaked and just began its downturn. The mudflat was hidden, and most of the slope below the ridge was still swallowed.*

*The campfire was mostly embers and ash, and now only barely fought back the misty coolness. The fumesticks were each burned about halfway, but still put out generous smoke. In the daylight it was much easier to see where we had landed and what was around us. Behind stretched a mass of land, flat and coated with a sea of stiff, waist high grasses. In front of us was the low-zone, the brownish waters of Kaeaul slowly creeping away from camp.*

*The fog was thinner. Instead of a great shrouding blanket, it hung out over the water, lurking just past the edges of where the low-zone was. I could see the sky above us, like a grey cap for the white walls ringing the isle. Its cloud-current was slow and pushed east to west.*

*With everyone up we had a small bite of our rations, consisting of smoked duroq sausage. It was gamey but nicely cooked and well spiced. We washed it down with some water, which had been boiled and distilled on the ship, then mixed with a spirit and sourfruit juice. I was expecting worse, so I will hold my tongue. Ferisen will apparently do no such thing.*

*Ferisen: Dry meat and tart water. Fantastic.*

*I prefer he say this to me rather than the hunters.*

*After we ate he requested my help in checking the equipment. He had brought from the ship a pair of survey posts, with a hundred meter (one survey-length) of rope connecting them. The poles were reinforced with iron siding and bore a pair of guides at the top to make sure the rope (which had markings every ten meters) remained straight when measuring.*

*He set one of the posts into the ground, and instructed me to wait by it until he gave the signal. I hoped he would elaborate, but he did not, instead setting off inland carrying the other post and bringing the rope alongside. I watched as he walked until it drew taut, and set the post into the ground beside them. Then he drew a small green flag from his satchel and waved it. I waved back with my hand.*

*It seemed to be the right move, as he set about removing the post from its spot and promptly walked back to me. 'All seems to be in order,' he said, and told me he was going to 'make sure the hunters know what they're doing before we start this properly.'*

*We then returned to the landfall camp, and soon the other landing craft appeared out of the fog. Three were sitting on board, of which two were rowing.*

*One of them was Captain Laed, wearing a lignothorax sporting green pauldrons. Beside them was a hunter of truly massive stature by the name of Daoss, who rowed alongside the captain. Also joining them was Goss, which surprised both me and the other hunters. I understand my brother is here as a cartographic scribe, but I cannot for the life of me fathom what he's doing here in the field and away from his worktable.*

*They (or rather Daoss and Captain Laed) rowed as far onto the mudflat as they could, navigating around a large rocky protrusion lying in the surf. They moved slowly, and were met out in the water by Tarr. He guided the boat from the front, ensuring it didn't run aground on an*



*arthrovalve, of which there were many. Once the tide rolled back in they would be covered, but that was some time away.*

“If I may, Captain.” Tarr waved Laed down as they stepped off the boat. Goss disembarked shortly after, and beelined towards the other two scribes. Daoss, huge as he was, hauled the boat clear of the falling tide on his own. Laed stepped up to Tarr, and leaned in.

“What is *he* doing here?”

The hunter-captain sighed, glancing in the cartographer's direction.

“He wanted to see it for himself.” Laed answered, watching him rope Eaehe *and* Ferisen into a conversation. “I see no reason to argue with the scribes who draw our maps.”

“Well,” A look glittered in Tarr’s eyes, which drew a sigh from Laed as they noticed, “now that he’s in the field, he’s fair game.”

“Sure.” Laed walked off. “Just be reasonable.”

He grinned slyly, the edges of a smile prodding at his cheeks.

“Hey Goss!” Tarr called out to the scribe, who upon hearing his own name shouted was briefly startled. After a moment of looking about wildly, Goss caught sight of him, and waved. He and the two other holt personnel stood in the shallow, letting the tide lapp against their waders. Goss wore only the boots and subsuit with his cloak, foregoing most of the armor.

“If you’re looking for a better view, you can stand on that!” The hunter gestured to the great rock the scribe was currently pressing his palms to. It was tube shaped and rough, with angular planes and nodules. It sat half-buried in the shore amidst a patch of scrub in the churned water.

Tarr thought it would take more convincing, but Goss was more than happy to clamber up, even though he now only stood a meter higher above the mudflat. Tarr quickly sought Fehn's attention.

*"Look, he's standing on it."* Tarr whispered, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. Fehn's eyes widened.

*"So he is."* She mused. *"Do you think we could stir it?"*

They chuckled to each other, and moved towards one of the arthrovalves sticking up from the mud. The ones on drier land were closed, their three-lobed carapace fully shut and jointed arms tucked within. They chose one and lifted it together, then carried it over to the 'rock' that Goss stood upon.

He failed to notice them set it down in front of him. Now in the surf, the short and muddy shorebreak reached the shut arthrovalve. The tides drew back and forth, washing over both the shelled creature and Goss' platform.

Then it moved.

Goss was thrown resolutely off the side with a shout, and somehow landed on his feet. The rock rose out of the mud, a set of six legs sprouting from the underside, each tipped with a thick point. Its blocky, flat-faced head shook as much as it could, flinging mud off unblinking black eyes and hefty plating.

It was a heavy-set creature. Like its head, the body was about as wide as it was tall, with the entire beast measuring well over two meters. Colored like stone and mud, its back and sides were distinctly darker, with the only vibrancy being a bright crimson underside.

It scuttled forward leisurely, seemingly unaware of the entire man who had been standing on it seconds ago. It approached the arthrovalve, and bumped it with the front of its stubby snout,

rolling the much smaller creature around in the surf. Then its jaw opened, revealing shearing planes of thick mouthparts and the interlocking wedges they formed. The arthrovalve was gripped in its maw, and a creaking noise followed as the shell strained against the force applied to it. Then it shattered with a resounding *crunch*, splintering into shards of black shell and pieces of its inner body.

Goss backed away, eyes fixed firmly on the jaws. It continued to pay him no mind, choosing instead to devour the unfortunate thing between its plates. The flat-fronted beast responsible for its demise swallowed what meat there was in only a few bites, each bringing a fair helping of mud into its gullet. Within seconds the only remains of the arthrovalves outer shell were left.

A rumbling hum came from the thing as it turned away from Goss. Its spiked legs carried its wide bulk down the shoreline, making its way towards the arthrovalves further down the waters edge.

Tarr was in hysterics, as was Fehn. While Laed and Daoss found it begrudgingly funny, Eaeche seemed more exasperated than amused. Roan watched it leave, scuttling through the mud.

Ferisen was, however, distinctly less than amused.

“What was that?” Goss turned and asked the tracker, wide-eyed. Tarr held a hand out while he wiped a tear or two from his eyes and caught his breath. A few moments later he answered the cartographer.

“Mud-scuttler, real friendly.” He chuckled, clapping Goss on the back. “You’ll be fine, so long as you keep your grabbers away from its face-parts.”

“*I figured as much...*” Ferisen muttered, mostly to himself. His eyes were on the fragments of black shell lying on the ground. He’d seen arthrovalves rip holes clean through landing boats that run aground on them. They were quite sturdy things.

A second crunch sounded from further down on the beach. The mud-scuttler had found another meal.

*Relatively sturdy at least.* This time he kept his thoughts silent.

*Soon after Goss regained his bearings, both he and Daoss reboarded and set off. Daoss rowed by himself once they were clear of the muddy ground, and the boat was quickly out of sight.*

*We planned to return to camp, and so did not need to pack. The fumesticks were extinguished returned to their box, bedrolls were furled up, and what unburnt logs remained were packed in the hide bag we brought them in. These we all left at the site for the evening. Finally we flipped out rowboat. Last night’s drizzle had passed, but should that return it would otherwise pool in the bottom.*

*Between me, Ferisen, and the hunters, we were armed to the teeth. The Captain carried a shortspear on their back and a dagger on their shoulder. Sheathed at their hip was an arming sword with a tar-sealed hilt. It bore a two part handle shaped like a pair of stingers, one flowing down and out from the knuckles and the other scything out from the pommel.*

*Then we set off on the first perimeter survey of Isle North[A]. We followed the highzone south, where the 4.140 chartings indicated a small bay before curving around to the interior of the mass. We found and soon passed by it, measuring along the embankment in hundred meter increments until Isle North[B] was across the way.*

*The reedgrasses that lined the highzone ridge quickly grew sparser until they all but vanished. Below us the lowzone became dense with scrub, until the short plants blanketed the ground, covering every inch of mud. These flats were more sheltered from greater Kaeaul, and faced in towards opposing highzones.*

*North[A] pushed eastward, then bent south and southeast after that. It arced around until we were right across from Isle South. The tide had fallen, and with it the fog had receded such that we could see clear across the gap. Further down the ridge we spotted the edge of one of the eastern isles, which ran parallel to North[A]'s south-eastern face.*

*It was clear the lowzones of North[A] and South had merged. If we so wished we could walk straight across without touching water. It was like this too in the channel between the isle to the east, such that it resembled a miniature valley. Between the isle groups was more open water, still shrouded by fog.*

*Once we passed the eastern isle the mudflat scrub again grew sparse and the reeds returned. We turned north to curve up and around a peninsula, then walked west beside the open bog water until returning to camp in the early afternoon. We had another few bites to eat, then set off on the second loop around the isle. I made sure to note where the first set of perimeter measurements were written, and began the next tallying set beside them. Ferisen is keeping his own sets, so between us there will be four for consistency.*

*This second perimeter went smoothly, and without interruption. We returned to camp as the sky began to darken. The gloam tide was approaching its highest, and peaked while we ate again.*

*Dinner was much the same as breakfast, except Laed had managed to procure some rolls before leaving the ship. They had three for each of us to work through over the next day or so.*

*They had cooled, but were still tender and pleasantly salty. In the morning they will be stale, so at dawn I will set them in the fire before eating.*

*Once the fumesticks were lit and watch assigned, I tried my luck at sleeping. The weather was misty, as during the day, which I take to be favorably mild for Kaeaul. I will make use of it, and hope my comfort lasts.*

Laed prodded the fire with a stick, shifting an ember-ridden log.

“So.” Tarr watched a handful of sparks drift upward. They were quickly snuffed out in the wet air.

“I’ve no quarrel with them.” They responded, setting the stick down.

Tarr frowned. “I didn’t even ask.”

Laed eyed him. “It’s the first night of a survey, what else would *you* talk about?”

Tarr rolled his eyes and gestured for them to continue.

“These two seem... agreeably competent.” Laed looked to the sleeping scribes.

“Her, yes.” Tarr’s tail coiled around the stick, dragging it into his hand. “Not sure I’d call *him* agreeable.”

Laed shrugged, leaning back and sitting upright.

Tarr continued. “And then there’s the cartographer.”

“Goss?”

“Aye.”

The captain sighed. “What of him?”

“What was he doing here?” Tarr asked as if hadn’t already.

“Wanted to see the sights I guess.” Laed’s eyes rolled as they spoke.

“Ah of course, the sights.” Tarr snorted. “Gotta get a good eyeful of all this mud and fog.”

“I’ve seen his work. If feeling Kaeaul tug at his soles gets us a map then so be it. I’m not the one telling him to stand on mud-scuttlers.” An undercurrent of disappointment ran through the hunter-captains voice.

“Oh come on, it was funny!” Tarr protested, a grin spreading across his face. “You can’t deny that.”

“You’re right, I can’t.” Laed acknowledged after a pause. “I’m glad he didn’t lose an arm to the red-belly.”

“Alright, I don’t think he’s that...” Tarr searched for the word. “...clueless.

“He stood on it, didn’t he?” They raised an eyebrow at the tracker.

“He sure did.” The grin returned to his face, which again prodded at his mirrored cheek-scars. In the light they made him look gaunt, as if the two holes were still there and not filled in with long-healed tissue.

The two sat in silence for a time, each taking a sip from the vials of wakendraught Dosghru had prepared for them. The fire crackled on into the night, the sparks drifting higher and higher before being stifled as the night grew drier and drier. Or rather, drier by the standards of Kaeaul. The ground was still muddy and wet, the air damp and heavy.

As it would remain.

*Date :: 3/2/9*

*Year :: R4.151*

*Survey :: Day 2 of 5*

*Conditions were similar to yesterday down on the Kaeaul floor. I awoke (again) to muddy ground and damp air. Yesterday's cloud-currents have died off, and instead the sea above is motionless. Similarly the land-fog has thinned greatly, such that I can see clear across the isle. There is a light mist in the air, from which my rainhide is keeping me dry. It lost its warmth overnight. Fortunately the rolls were nice when toasted.*

*Captain Laed and Roan returned to the Ossaeon. On their way through the mists edge they passed Daoss, who was rowing alone through the water. Like the Captain, Daoss carried a short spear and dagger. His real arsenal was in a quiver on the small of his back, which carried about two dozen arrows of varying heads and weights. There was a huge longbow slung over his shoulder, nearly as tall as I was.*

*Once all were readied, we flipped the landing craft and started with the day's events. We would be mapping the interior of Isle North[A] in order to verify our perimeter measurements. We shall set out and cross the isle to points furthest from camp and tally the distance.*

*First we went east, skirting the dents on the isles north face. Then we went southwest, to the valley with the eastern isles. Next we set west to the highzone north of the bridge between North[A] and Isle South. After we went northeast to the lobe in the far corner. Finally our path took us southwest where we ended the interior survey below the west bay just before noon. It was across from North[B], the next isle on the list.*

*The tide was on its way out, so we quickly returned to camp to prepare. We planned to row across the water to North[B], but did not have much time to work with. Already the fumesticks and firewood were in their bags, so we packed our bedrolls while Daoss moved the boat to the edge of the lowzone surf.*



“What of you bogwalker?” Ferisen called out to the tracker. He was crouched outside the edge of camp, running his gloves through the mud.

“Tarr?” Fehn asked pointedly.

“We’ll meet on North[B]. Make camp across the lowzone from A].” Tarr’s eyes were fixed on the ground. “There are prints I want to look at.”

“More mud-scuttlers?” Ferisen asked.

“No.” He stood, his gaze moving to inland’s middle distance. “They make more than this.”

“Where will you be going?” Daoss asked, voice low as ever.

Tarr gestured vaguely to the isle. “There-ish. These are new, not fresh. I’ll look around until I recognize them.”

“Try to cross before the gloam tide.” Daoss shouldered a bag of firewood and set off down the ridge.

“No promises.” The hunter snarked as he walked away from the once-camp and into the isle.

“Don’t drown either!” Fehn called to him over her shoulder.

“I said no promises!” Tarr shouted back.

They crossed the water without issue, landing on the North[B] lowzone after noon. The tide was more out than in, so they carried the boat the rest of the way, passing by dozens of arthrovalves sitting in the wetness. Mud-scuttlers milled nearby, shuffling through the surf and digging up food with their plated heads. Crunches echoed around them, matching the shards of black shell littering the mud below their feet. The pieces ranged in age, some bright and fresh,

with sharp edges and glimmering pearlescent undersides. Others were far older and worn smooth by the tides, black splinters polished smooth.

Eventually they reached the highzone and followed it until they reached where Tarr suggested. There they began to set camp, clearing space for bedrolls and a fire as well as setting the fumesticks to be lit. Fehn busied herself with firecraft, sparks leaping from the striking steel in her hands. Soon enough the scraps of heat found a home in the tinder, flaring to life before being set in the makeshift hearth. She covered the infant blaze with a trio of logs, and the crew watched it devouring the kindling and lap at the wood.

The edges of dusk fell over the party as the gloam tide crept up the embankment. Scuttlers sifted through the mud below them, and the distant buzzing of things scattered across the isles of Kaeaul hummed in their ears. As did a splashing in the tide at their backs. The whole camp stood and turned. Within moments the sound had died away, leaving only the distant chirps.

“Hey all!” Tarr’s voice called to them from the dusk. The party sighed as he reached and clambered over the embankment. He appeared none the worse for wear, save for a thin film of mud on his leg plating.

“Welcome back.” Daoss shook hands with the tracker. Tarr seemed in good spirits, though the news he relayed did not inspire such feeling in the party. Especially the scribes.

“There’s a reedwalker on that isle.” He gestured behind him, pointing towards the lowzone he just emerged from. “It visited our camp a few hours before we returned from the interior survey.”

“Did you see it?” Daoss asked, a hand drifting towards the shortspear sticking up from the ground beside him. Fehn was already lighting the fumesticks, and soon the aromatic smoke flowed from all six.

“No,” he shook his head, “didn’t follow them all the way to it. It’s kept its distance from us.”

“We’re being followed?” Eaehe raised an eyebrow, quill at her tablet.

“Aye.” Tarr nodded in her direction. “We should all watch our steps, especially in the mud from here on out.”

Ferisens brow furrowed at the trackers' news. He leaned over to Eaehe and made a snide comment. She rolled her eyes and noted it in her entry.

*Tarr rejoined us on Isle North[B] just before dark. He stayed on North[A] for a time to investigate some tracks near last camp which he determined it to be a reedwalker. While he did not follow its prints all the way to the beast itself, he thinks it to be keeping its distance and that we should be careful ‘in the mud’.*

*Ferisen: So the plan is to just hope it leaves us alone? Can’t say I’m thrilled.*

*I will not act as if I have a better idea. Later in the evening I spoke with Tarr again, and he told me it will likely stay on Isle North[A] for now and should not cross the channel.*

## Chapter 5

### Year 144

With his dagger firmly planted in its eye socket, the nefarion fell limp and collapsed into the brine. Tarr was again submerged, and felt muddy water pour into his helm. It burned awfully, stinging his cheeks and teeth, mixing with the coppery taste flowing down his tongue.

His back hit the ground again, thumping into the silt. He reached for his face with his gauntlets, hands closing around thick limbs clamped on his head. Its mandibles were firmly locked, and the weight of the creature held him down in the shallow surf.

Then he felt another pair of hands beside him. His vision flashed black as both sides were wrenched free from his face, his own jaws finally closing as the iron bar was removed from his mouth. Tarr clawed at his helmet, tearing at the collar and ripping it off. He burst upward, throwing himself to his feet and swaying in the downpour, gasping and vaguely aware of voices behind him.

His eyes darted around wildly, chasing the fuzz lurking at the edges of his vision while the pain through his mouth poured over him in waves. The sound of rain falling beat behind the ringing in his ears, sloughing off his armor and washing mud into the brine. His head craned up, and he felt salty copper flow down his throat. The grey sky overhead was dark and churning, the flow and currents of blackening clouds swirling and crashing against each other, spitting out torrents where they met.

He looked down, and watched red pour off his chin and into the water.

*Date :: 4/2/9*

*Year :: R4.151*

*Survey :: Day 3 of 5*

*This rainhide is starting to get cold.*

*The mists have returned in force this morning. It is not coming down, but the air is and heavier than yesterday. The sea above flows northeast but slowly. I probed Fehn for her thoughts on the weather, to which she guessed we may see drizzling at midday.*

*Overnight the ship had come around the western face of the isle, and moored in the deeper water between North[B] and Isle South. It was close enough for us to see its front third peeking out of the fog. This time it was Fehn and Tarr who returned in the boat. In exchange we were joined by Captain Laed and a hunter I had not been met with.*

*Her name was 'Kariala', a dark haired woman with a black furred tail. She wore a full rainhide like Ferisen and I, but her pauldrons and tabard were a bright shade of red. Though I am beginning to look forward to not wearing one, we look very cohesive as a group. It had not crossed my mind until she arrived that we were without a doctor of some sort. Kariala told me she prefers the term 'surgeon', which does not bring me much comfort when paired with her toothed weapons.*

*We finished the rolls and sausage we've been carrying and started the survey. Our path started up and over the northern face of the isle, quickly rounding a lobe and turning south. Then we walked until the highzone ridge bent east. Isle North[B] was far smaller than North[A], and we completed both the first and second perimeter by midmorning.*

*At the start of the interior measurements the tide was nearing its peak. Fortunately the isle's size meant we only needed to chart a single stride across it. On return to camp we packed our things and loaded the boat. We shoved off at the water's highest, and rowed east along the shore of North[A]. Eventually we rounded the fog between the open isles and landed on the tip of a peninsula.*

*We reached Isle South, landing at the far end of the bridge we observed from North[A]. Captain Laed set out the rest of the day's plan. We would set camp where we would then run the perimeter starting east. So long as we keep pace we should be near camp once the tide goes out. Then we measure and finish mapping.*

*The isle was large but devoid of features. Its shape was of a teardrop, with a point at one end and a broad curve along the other. After the first perimeter the tide was lowered much of the way but still covered the middle. A light drizzle started around noon and has started to thicken the mists. Upon returning to camp after the second loop, the tide had fallen to its lowest.*

The construct reached across the kilometer gap between North[A] and Isle South, and was a third as wide at its narrowest. It cut the flow like a cork, setting a wall between the open bog on either side of the isles. The ground was covered in a dense mat of scrub as if a great tree was buried in the mud. Stiff leaves poke through to the air like the tips of a canopy gasping for breath between tides.

They crossed and measured in silence, marveling at its size. Eleven years ago there had been a channel in the center throughout the day. Now even at the waters lowest there was land in its place. But soon the brackish flow began to froth at the edges of the bridge, carrying swirls of silt and soil and sediment. Little waves washed back and forth over the plantmat, each pass

churning through gnarled stems and twisty roots. A thin film grew on the plants in a muddy spackle that hid their green.

The light rain petered off as the afternoon marched on, and the mists had grown heavy in its wake. They dropped into a thick blanket that shrouded the isle and slowed their progress. Still they kept their pace up as much as they were able, even if they could not see where they put their feet.

It was a comfortable quiet, if a relative one. The chirps and buzzes of Kaeaul were never far away, and a distinct chittering that called Isle South its home wavered through the day. At times it sounded loud and clear, before growing faint for a while, then rearing again. Soon evening drew near, and with it the latter stages of the interior survey. Ferisen Insisted on handling the posts, so he spent the most time walking. Laed and Daoss followed him closely, which the surveyor was silently grateful for given the fading light.

Kariala walked with Eaehe. She was more than willing to answer the scribes' questions and very eagerly displayed her expertise. At present the two were speaking about types of helmets, specifically a model that paired with lignothorax to let the wearer breathe while largely submerged.

“You mentioned ‘cutting the pipes out of a nefarion’, could you elaborate on that?” Eaehe made a note in her journal titled ‘*Supplementary Information: Bog-Hunter Equipment*’. A grin split the hunters face.

“Ah yes, nefarion.” Her eyes softened as if recalling a warm memory. “If you split the abdomen up between the segments you cut them to pieces. But if you’re careful and open it from the underside you can get the tubes out whole.”

“But you do cut them?” Eaehe condensed the hunter’s description to a few points that had a far more clinical air than her word.

“Well they’re attached at both ends.” Kariala paused, eyeing the scribe. She waited until Eaehe looked up to continue. “There’s an air sac by the thorax and spiracles at the tail. If you cut where they meet, you can get the ventral and dorsal tubes out unbroken.”

“Mmm hmm...” Eaehe scribbled. “Then?”

“Then you tar it to keep water out and bend it over a frame. Then trim and mount it in the gasket.”

Eaehe wrote quietly for a moment, then thanked the hunter-surgeon. She had no further questions for the time, and Kariala finished her explanation, so they walked on in silence.

*Afternoon is fading and the fog is laying thick around us. We cannot see our feet, nor the ground. It hangs around our knees in most places, but every so often one of us steps into a shallow and appears to sink down to the waist. Most often it is Ferisen who walks into these, but through his grumbling I can parse that he is glad the survey posts are tall enough to be seen through it.*

*On this earthen mound I can see my knees and boots once again, as well as the whiteness stretching out in every direction. In a few places I can catch sight of water. I can also hear the scrapes of sheaths and scabbards. The hunters have drawn their weapons, and are speaking quickly to each other. I hear Kariala ask Ferisen where the nearest waterline is, but something in the mist catches my eye.*

*It looks like a sort of black stick poking up through the fog. There are a few others like it, but they are all behind us and seem to bob down every so often. The nearest one to us is now a*



*dozen meters from where I stand and write. I can see it clearly enough to note that this one has a jagged tip as if broken off from a limb.*

*I point it out to Captain Laed, who now is reaching out to me—*

“Eaehe they’re here we need to go!” The hunter-captain grabbed the scribe firmly by the pauldron and pulled her from the hill as if throwing her in front of himself and gave her a stiff push between the shoulders, urging Eaehe into a light run.

“We’re going east!” Laed shouted forward from their place as rearguard. “Stay in arms reach and keep pace!”

If there was room for argument, no one took it. They moved at a speed all could manage. Not everyone had seen them, and those that had did not see clearly for the fog was thick and hung about their knees as if they were wading through a shallow pool of cloud. The evening overhead cast the bog into darkness and with every moment more light seemed to fade further.

Chittering voices followed, as did the muted scabbling of footsteps in mud. The calls came in staggered waves, such that even the scribes could tell there was a number following them. None could yet say how many, but more and more sticks appeared in the fog everytime they looked backward. They soon reached the western embankment and formed a half-circle with their backs to the lowzone at Laed’s direction. The tide had come up as far as it would, and turned the slope into a steep drop into murky water. The fog abated at the shore, giving the party a clear view of ground in front of their perimeter.

Chittering followed them, becoming less distant every second until it stopped all at once. They waited in silence, weapons drawn and boots planted firmly. Daoss, who stood behind the

perimeter, unbacked his bow and took an arrow from his quiver, which he nocked but did not draw back.

The sounds of countless steps came from all directions until they too stopped, as if their pursuers were waiting in the curtains. Then one stepped forward out of the mist and at Eaehe. A clattering followed from its head as stout mandibles rattled against the rest of the jawsparts.

It carried itself on six limbs that held up its brown and black-shelled body. Slowly it crawled from the fog, head and shoulders raised high. Finger sized claws left nicks and rents in the wet soil and a cluster of spikes jutted from its carapace. Half its head was taken up by the maw, and topped by a splintered horn. Each limb moved separately, taking their turn to reach, plant, grip, and bear weight as it moved. Then It stopped, choosing instead to stare with lidless eyes that bulged from the sides of its face.

Eaehe recognized a droznator on sight. She had seen them depicted in illustrations, and read accounts of those who had met them out in the bogs. As a scribe who prided herself on thorough research, she knew what they looked like and what they did.

Then the pack met them fully.

In an abstract, numerological way she was fully aware the back-spines of an average specimen would reach a little ways up her thigh, and that an adult would weigh perhaps half what she did. That research felt distant now as a dozen, meter long arthruds inched towards the party with more trickling in through the low-lying shroud. It was an unfamiliar and unwelcome feeling, amplified by the growing night.

She drew and held her bar-mace outward, putting steel between herself and the pack. Beside her Ferisen had his own mace out as well as his shield. Laed had both their spear and

sword leveled, the latter's arrow-straight edge and piercing tip gleaming in the dying light. Kariala held a hook with thorns on the curve and a weighty spiked hatchet.

The lead droznator sprang off the ground without warning. Eaehe had barely the time to put the mace between its jaws and her neck. Its open mouthparts *rang* against the bar. Then Kariala stepped forward and swatted it out of the air. The teeth of her thorn-hook bit into its carapace, gripping the shell so the hunter could throw it off to the side. It hit the ground with a *thump* and spray of muddy soil. Now Eaehe stepped towards it, weapon raised. Keeping both hands on the haft, she swung with her legs and shoulders, driving the mace and spike across the side of its head with a *crunch!* The arthrid reeled, stumbling over the edge and falling into the brownish water.

The rest of them surged forward and were met with steel.

Daoss pulled his bow to half draw and released, snapping the arrow forward. It shot through the air and landed firmly in a droznator, stopping its charge dead. The point stuck between the fore shoulder and neck, driving it into the ground while its claws scabbled in the dirt before falling still.

Eaehe had given the once-leader a blow that ran all the way up her arms. She hadn't landed a similar hit since, but it was clear after a few moments that the hunters would be carrying more weight. Ferisen did not use his mace with great force, instead using it to guide them away from him rather than cave their heads in.

Laed and Kariala swung at any nearby. The hunter-captain knocked the limbs away with their spear, whereupon they lunged forward and delivered a strike with the point. Kariala used her briared hook to catch them around the mid-body and throw them to the ground. In her other

hand she held a thin edged hatchet with a three pronged spike on the back face. Instead of piercing armor, she severed limbs as the joint.

Daoss had already sent four more arrows into the crowd by the time the attack slowed. One struck in midair. Another thudded duly into the side of one's head. Soon then the arthrids had enough, and a burst of high pitched chirps rang out as they disappeared into the fog. Half a dozen carcasses surrounded them, as did a sickly floral scent. Two for Laed and Kariala each, and more with feathered shafts sprouting from their shells.

“We all here?” Came Laed’s voice. They glanced around, and received a few *ayes*. “Good work.”

Now that the clamor was over the party heard clear splashing. Over the embankment was the once-lead droznator. There was a pronounced dent on the side of its head drifting haphazardly on its side through the murky surf. Daoss drew and sent an arrow into the underside of its thorax. It twitched and fell still, floating in the water.

“That one goes to you too!” Kariala clapped the scribe on her back, laughing when she almost careened down to join it.

Instead it was Laed who hopped over the side to land in the waist high water. They stepped to the floating body and grabbed the arrow sticking out of its underside, pulling it free and whistled before throwing it over their head. Daoss caught it, glancing at the iron tip before slipping it back in his quiver. Laed crawled up the embankment with a hand from Kariala, and the two hunters set about the bodies. With their heavy-backed knives they cut off the horns, spikes and talons, then stowed the trophies in their sidebags.

Eaehe turned back towards the carnage. There was one droznator lying where she had stood by Ferisen. It was missing the front of its jaws, and though the end of her bar mace was

splattered with greenish-yellow, she couldn't remember swinging this one. No one else seemed to pay it any mind, and she took a seat to catch her breath. Daoss approached and glanced at the jawless carcass, then her, then her weapon. Eaehe gave him a look halfway between confusion and uncertainty. He nodded, and reached down to pull her up to her feet.

“Arrows?” Laed asked the archer.

“One with a broken shaft.” He responded and showed them a lone arrowhead with a few splinters at its base.

The captain hummed back while they reached into their side bag. They brought out a horn and handed it to Eaehe. She looked down at the black horn in her hands. It was hard to the touch, feeling like a blend of wood and bone. The tip was broken, such that the end was ragged and sharp, indicative that the damage was recent. Unsure of what else to do with it, she tucked it into her own sidebag.

At the time of the ambush they were well into the last interior stride of Isle South. They were crossing from east to west at its widest, and would have traveled north along the ridge once they reached it. A glance at Ferisen's field markings showed they had met the droznator in the center, and so were missing a final piece of the survey.

From the perimeter they knew the isles teardrop shape was roughly symmetrical. Judging their last measurements endpoint to be a valid approximation of the middle, Laed, Eaehe and Ferisen were confident that the span could be safely approximated. Daoss found no fault in their logic, and while Kariala expressed her concerns about thoroughness, she knew that time was against them.

The haze was shifting, and with it would soon go the last pieces of light. Evening was no longer lurking behind the clouds and had extinguished the faint redness of afternoon. On their persons were the means to start a small fire if need be, but none wished to be caught wandering through fogwash in the dark. The party could still hear chittering arthrids, though distant and lesser in number for now.

They returned to camp quickly and quietly, weapons drawn and keeping all the way against the edge of the highzone. Twice the amount of fumesticks were lit that night. Lone and paired droznator would stay away from a flickering fire, but the pack was well aware of the group camping in the bog.

Laed and Kariala had brought more rations in the morning, though they were the same. The party ate quietly. Daoss and Kariala spoke of their weapons, though the hunter-surgeon was evidently carrying the conversation. He was revealed to be carrying just under three dozen shellpiercer heads. He showed some off. They were large and weighty, with barreled shafts and diamond-shaped tips that bordered on oversized. Each was fletched with the arm feathers of duroq, bristling in his quiver with pops of blue and white.

*We were attacked by a pack of droznator near the middle of Isle\_C during the late afternoon. At Laed's behest we made for the highzone ridge before facing them. Before they were driven off we brought down ten or eleven of their number, of which I slayed two.*

*We returned to camp without event. Daoss and Kariala are keeping watch.*

*I was given the horn of the pack leader as a trophy. I am tiring of duroq sausage.*

The fog around camp had receded by the time low night came and went, fought back by the fumesticks aura. The smoke drifted at ankle height, pooling in boot prints and curling around the edges of those in bedrolls. Those not on watch took longer than usual to fall asleep, save for Laed, who wasted no time in getting rest. One by one they managed to ignore the chittering in the dark beyond the campfire long enough to drift off until only the watches remained awake.

“How many did you get?” The hunter-surgeon asked, gazing at the sparks hissing into the wet air. Kariala prodded at the fire with her hatchet, nudging one of the newer logs into the heart of the coals.

“Four.”

“Well you’ve got Laed and I beat then!” She chuckled. Daoss smiled lightly.

“I suppose.” The hulking archer leaned back. “Eaehe did well.”

“That she did. The bar mace was a good pick for her.” Again the hand axe nudged the firewood.

Daoss hummed in agreement. “Scribes and maces are tried and tested.”

Kariala snickered lightly.

“It's not like you have to worry about edge alignment either.” She prodded him gently with her words.

He rolled his eyes. “I have double your score.”

“It’s not a competition.”

“Good for you.” Daoss scoffed. “I’d be winning otherwise.”

“I’d like to see you get four without us standing in front of you.”

They left it there. Lighthearted as their faux debate was, neither were looking to continue. Kariala reveled in the melee, and had sworn by her toothed hatchet and briar hook for years.

Daoss saw no sense in trading bow for blade, as none in their crew could have replaced him. Only he had the strength to draw it, but he did so with the space afforded to him by the thorns and blades of others. It was a topic they visited often, such that their dialogue bordered on rehearsed.

The night crackled on, until the tides of high night lapped at the ridge to their backs. A light drizzle began to drift from above at dawn, slowly washing away the fog. In their sleep the party shifted, pulling their coverings tighter about them as water prodded at the edges.



## Chapter 6

*Date :: 5/2/9*

*Year :: R4.151*

*Survey :: Day 4 of 5*

*My rainhide is cold.*

*We awoke early, and to a drizzle that had beaten down since midnight. Kaeaul was quiet without the sounds of droznator and left us alone while we ate. The sea above pushes south. With it, a chill is growing in the air.*

*The Ossaeon was still moored at fog's edge between North[B] and Isle South. Captain Laed returned to the ship at first light, taking with them Ferisen's measurements. The bridge measurements needed to get on cartography paper as soon as possible. A boat returned to us after dawn carrying not only Fehn and Tarr but Roan as well.*

*Ferisen feels different, but I am glad more of the hunting crew is here. They also brought more waterskins and firewood. Fehn and Tarr expressed disappointment to me when I told them of yesterdays droznator attack. Apparently Kaeaul has been very quiet on this expedition according to them.*

*We will be surveying the Eastern Isles today and tomorrow. There are three of them, all smaller than North[A] and Isle South. One runs east to west, designated Isle East[L]. The smallest is Isle East[S], connected by lowzone to the mass thanks to Isle East[M] (Medium).*

*Today we are aiming to map East[M] and [S]. Once the tide has risen enough we will take the boat across the water and land on East[M]'s northwestern face. While waiting we ate and packed camp. The fumesticks are starting to run low, but we will not be lighting as many as last night again. Hopefully.*

*We made landfall on Isle East[M] before noon. We set camp and built a smoky fire so that the ship crew might spot where we set up. They will be sailing around Isle South until they are in the water off our shore.*

*Then we started south down the isle, a path which brought us around a peninsula and north again. From there we could see not only East[S] to the right, but an even smaller 'microisle' between it and East[M]. The reedgrasses were especially dense along the path but died off once we turned west. Soon after we began moving south again we reached camp. The Ossaeon now sits just in front of the waterfog. We extinguished the signal fire and started on the second loop around. Upon returning we crossed two strides through the isle to the far points of each peninsula and back.*

High tide peaked well before the interior measurements were finished. Noon was starting to approach, and so the party made their way towards Isle East[S] while the tide was out. Fehn suggested they make for the microisle, something which Ferisen seconded. Earlier he felt it looked large enough to warrant a perimeter of its own. Nothing more than a single lap, as his intent was to have a rough number to compare against East[S]. The party traveled east along the highzone until they came to face the tiny isle.

Tarr judged noon to have come by the depth of the water. True low tide was still hours away, the brine had fallen enough to reveal the strip of scrub-mat and mud between them and

their next target. This was a footpath rather than a bridge compared to the crossing between North[A] and South. At its narrowest there was land enough for only two to walk abreast through the dense plants. Their woody limbs crunched beneath every footfall, scratching at boots and reaching for waistcoats with spindly stems.

They crossed it quickly and the path melted back into drier land. Ferisen, who had gone first through the lowzone to stamp down the plants, remarked on the steepness. He reached for the roots of scrub long buried in the dirt, using them as handholds.

A lone cluster of headless reeds loomed above him at the ridge, which struck Tarr as odd. They were between highzones, which meant this grass was facing into a bog-valley. It wasn't unheard of for them to colonize patches in such places, but these were especially dense and uniform in size, as well as short. As if they had been trimmed.

"Finally..." Ferisen muttered under his breath, reaching for the base of the stems.

"Wait don't!" Tarr yelled, but it was already too late. Ferisen had only grabbed a handful before the ground shifted, throwing him back down the ledge.

A great hunk of earth rose and three grasping limbs reached for the surveyor. Pincers closed around his ankles and snatched him out of the air to drag him back up the slope. Even bigger limbs followed, supporting the mound of dirt like a giant tripod. Its claws and tall beaked head were covered in mud, and dangled from its underside like thick roots. Two fist-sized eyes sprouted from each side, and one marked the center of its face. It gazed forward, blank and cyclopic, the glassy orbs reflecting Ferisens iron-grey face like a pitch gemstone.

Fehn drew her weapon and lunged up the ridge. Daoss held back and reached for one of his heavier arrows, drawing back his bow while Fehn and Kariala went for its legs. The

reedwalker towered above the party, looming three or four times overhead. Its dangling arms were long and slender, and drew both the surveyor up towards its mouth.

He screamed as its jawparts opened wider and wider while he fumbled for his mace. Tarr threw himself at Ferisen, pulling him down and swinging up with his pick. He struck the reedwalker near the joint of an arm as its maw snapped shut and the bladed edges of its beak closed on empty air. It hissed, turning its dangling head to stare at Tarr.

Roan dug his braced leg into the ground and leveled his rifle. He squeezed the trigger and it fired with a deafening blast, hurling a round of stoneshot into an arm socket. Now the reedwalker screamed as one of its grasping limbs fell limp and unresponsive. Its grip on Ferisen faltered. Then Tarr managed to pull him out of its clutches. He almost flung the surveyor, hurling him clear of the beast.

Together Fehn and Kariala tackled its back leg, wrenching it out from under its towering body. The reedwalker dropped to one of its knees, leveling the tip of its beak with Daoss. His bow creaked, and snapped a massive arrow through the drizzle. It slammed into the thin plate beneath its shell, landing between the head and ruined arm with a piercing *crunch!*

The rumbling crackle and groan of a felled tree washed over the party as the reedwalker lurched backward and nearly collapsed. Kariala and Fehn dove, leaping out of the way of its rear leg which dug into the mud, grinding it to a halt. Its mandibles clattered together, wailing a screech into Kaeaul. The reedwalker backed further into the highzone while swiping at the arrow sprouting from its shoulder with one of the still-working arms. Then it turned and staggered away, lurching down the ridge and breaking into a run off through the lowzone, striding clear above the shallow water.

The party watched it retreat while they caught their breath. It was sprinting northeast, and soon galloped around the bend of East[M], the tips of its bristling reeds swaying in the mist until it vanished into the bog.

“You alright?” Tarr asked Ferisen, offering a hand to the surveyor and pulling him onto his feet.

“Yeah.” He answered, wiping at the mud gathering on his rainhide. “Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it.” Tarr’s response was curt and distant.

His eyes were set firmly in the direction the reedwalker had gone. He had lost his handpick in the scuffle. He favored that weapon quite heavily, and suspected that it was still lodged in its arm. Without it he was armed only with his crossbolt and assorted daggers. Fehn noticed and thumped him on the shoulder plate.

“You’re going after it?” She asked, even if she knew the answer.

“I think so. I’ll need that back.” Tarr glanced down at his empty glove.

“Do it after we return to camp. We survey East[S] tomorrow.” Roan spoke up, cutting Tarr out of his thoughts. The rifleman looked to Ferisen, who nodded. He turned to Eaehe, who was writing furiously in her logbook.

*Ferisen stepped on a reedwalker at the microisle between East[M] and East[S].*

*The hunters drove it off with stoneshot and an arrow. Tarr plans to retrieve his pick, which he lost in one of its arms. Daoss has written the arrow off.*

*We are pausing here, and will finish the survey tomorrow starting with Isle East[S], then moving on to East[L].*

Evening was still hours off when they returned to camp. The fire they started was small but healthy, and three fumesticks surrounded them. They were safer there than on Isle South. Unlike the droznator pack it was clear the reedwalker was gone and would not be taking another interest in them.

“Eaehe!” She heard Tarr quite clearly, and put a last dot in her entry.

“Tarr.” She greeted him as she folded and stowed her logbook. “Is it time?”

“It is. Better for me to start off in the light.”

“Mmm.” Eaehe agreed, keeping bringing her pencil out. “Anything to note.”

Tarr paused and thought. He threw a quick look over his shoulder, in the direction the reedwalker had gone.

“Leaving with the fallen tide, traveling northeast in pursuit of a reedwalker.” He pointed directly across the water, towards the slope of Isle East[L] where the inward bend was deepest. “We meet there. The Ossaeon will come around to the bay tomorrow and moor in the peak.”

Then he left. The party watched him go, following the reedwalkers tracks until he too disappeared from sight.

*I am comfortable not continuing given the events of today and yesterday. That said, I am relieved we have finally found the reedwalker. I did not enjoy it hanging over our heads for two days. Tarr and Fehn are both confident it is gone for good and will not be returning.*

“Nice shot.”

For once it was Roan who began a conversation. He and Daoss were more than comfortable in silence together, but low night was well upon them and the rest of the party snored louder than usual.

“Thanks.” Daoss also needed something to break up the sounds of their companions slumbering. And of Kaeaul. “You too.”

Roan sat quietly for a moment. His rifle was in his lap and free of its rainshroud. Over his shoulder hung an old cloth, and at his foot was a vial of oil. Already he had removed the pins holding it together and separated the barrel from the stock.

“It didn’t do anything.”

“Nothing?” Daoss raised an eyebrow. *Was it supposed to come apart at the seams?*

“I thought it would hit harder.” He scooped a handful of ash from the fire and scrubbed it into the burnished iron with his glove. He gave extra attention from the side that spent its time facing into the wood, removing small flecks of surface rust. “That powder charge was a measure and a half.”

“Be careful with that.” The archer looked at the rifle warily. “It’s not a ship cannon.”

Roan was well aware of the danger that came with overpressuring. There was a reason he had started with quarter measures. He turned the barrel upside down and smacked the closed end. A light trickle of black powder fell from the muzzle and onto his boot.

“Its burning too slow.” Roan pulled off a glove and touched it. It wasn't wet when it came out, but quickly fused with the mud it fell on. He grabbed the cloth and wiped away the ash.

“You need something heavier.”

“Stoneshot is plenty heavy.” Roan answered as he pulled a tool from his weapons sheath. It had a thin wooden handle with two coiling prongs on the end called a ‘worm’. Together they

gripped the cloth rag as Roan pushed it down the barrel. When he drew it out it was covered in soot.

“Not your shot.” Daoss corrected. “These arrows are for high-poundage bows. They would break in a lighter frame.”

Roan understood him, but disagreed. “I don’t need another rifle.”

His tail coiled around the vial's lip and brought it to his hands. The cork popped out easily, and he applied some to the rag’s clean side. With it he gave the barrel, trigger, and hammer assemblage a thin coat.

“Then maybe you do need something heavier. You should get your hands on some ironshot.” Stoneshot was effective and easy to come by, but had a tendency to shatter at unfortunate times. Daoss was far from an expert but knew his way around those weapons enough to speak confidently on them.

“I’ll have them imported by the pallet from the Foundries of Brimm.” Roan remarked dryly as he set the barrel and locked the pins. Daoss chuckled. Then he slipped the handcannon into its shroud and set it across his lap.

The two sat in silence for a while, listening to the fire crackle and the bog chirp in the distance. By the time they spoke again, night's high tide was lapping against the ridge to their left.

“Do you plan to see Brimm?” This time it was Daoss who broke the stillness. Roan thought to himself for a while beneath the growing drizzle.

“No. I’d rather wait for it to come to me.” The idea of importing from across the sea was very appealing to him. Maybe if he forged some iron rounds he could get Doehehn to convince the Guild of his ‘pallet’ idea.



“I would go if the chance came.” Roan waited for the look to continue, which he did.

“Not to stay though, just a visit. Maybe try some leadshot.”

Daoss snorted. “Gerrel would die on the spot.”

“He would.” Roan laughed quietly. “Cursemetal and all that.”

“Aye.” The archer nodded in agreement. He kept a reserve of six arrows coated in the substance. They were especially dangerous and lived in their own fold of the quiver, tucked under a flap in the corner. Daoss used them sparingly, as they had a propensity to ruin the meat of anything struck by them.

He had no reason to think lead shot would be any different.

## Chapter 7

Tarr had chosen a good time to leave. The fallen tide was on its way out, and his quarry's path was clear to see. He followed in its tracks, pacing after spots of crushed plant mat along the edge of East[M]. They turned at the bog-valley and brought him along the southern shore of East[L], all the way to the far end.

The trail led up the lowzone of a tiny isle. Tarr held back at the sight of a reed cluster bristling atop the ridge. He instead climbed up to a point just south of it. It was a smaller mass but he was able to keep his eyes on the buried reedwalker. He waited there, watching the mound of earth intently. Late afternoon faded into evening and with it came the rising of the gloam tide.

He slept lightly amidst the darkening clouds and distant chirps of Kaeaul. The surf rolled out into low night, drawing away from him. With it came the sounds of things out among the isles, their low buzzing no longer concealed by the sloshing of briny surf. To his east he could parse the sounds of mud scuttlers feeding, shells crunching between plated maws. They drew far nearer to him without the warding haze of fumesticks or a flickering campfire. They dug into the mud as high night washed over the land. Hours passed with only the sounds of lapping water and faint chirps filling his ears.

Then came a distant, unfamiliar sound. It was shrill and sudden, a single tone that quickly faded into nothing. Then hours passed without a sound.

A sharp *crack!* rang out directly north of him hours before daybreak. Another *crack* sounded, followed then by a snap like dwarfed thunder. A low, dull clattering came afterward. The hunter-tracker was on his feet in an instant, dagger and bolt thrower drawn. He kept his breathing slow, and remained crouched on the ground until dawn. No other noises came.

He crept down into the flat with early hints of light at his back. Carefully he snuck to where the reedwalker had been during the start of the night. The reeds he spotted yesterday were gone and in their place was a broad hole behind the ridge. It was shallow around the edges, but the middle held a number of deep points where it had once dug its limbs in. Tarr could see greenish-yellow fluid pooling in the bottom. It mixed with the upturned, sodden ground into a thick slurry. The mud reeked of pungent sweetness, of a sickly floral brightness that overpowered the scents of rain and brine. He did not need to taste it to know it was arthrichor.

His hand pick sat nearly buried just beyond the hole. Reedwalker blood clung along its point, but smelled less strong. He was grateful to have the weapon back, but his attention was quickly stolen by marks leading down the slope. It was broad and smooth, but ran through with the uneven scrapes and ridges of dragging limbs.

Tarr allowed the upturned and flattened scrub. It led him up the slope of East[L], then through its interior isle. He followed cautiously, keeping his head on a swivel through the mist. The clouds overhead were a darker shade than usual, but the tracks were broad and clear. Still there were traces that could not be hidden from a hunter-tracker. He collected bits and pieces of reedwalker shell, pocketing shards of brown carapace.

The tracks followed East[L]'s northern shore. Then they stopped and turned, diving over the ridge and down into the mud. By the time Tarr reached this shift in direction, the morning tide was nearing its crest and filled the long bog-valley between him and Isle North[A]. The

marks were easy to spot there, for the bed of plants had been torn away in a broad stroke. Tarr considered donning his helm and fording the gap. He turned to his left, thinking it would be wise to ask Fehn what she thought, but spoke only to the mist at his side.

Tarr chose to wait for the waters. The lowzone was narrow, so he would not have to wait long to cross. He opened one of the small leather pouches at his waist, undoing the sealing clasps and revealing some pieces of dried duroq. He ate them quickly, or rather as quickly as he could. The strips of meat were stringy and tough but Tarr enjoyed them regardless. The strong gameyness was relegated to an aftertaste, distant amidst the flavors of curing smoke.

The tide was beginning to run out by the time he finished chewing. Early hints of drizzle continued to mount, as if the skies hold on its own breath was starting to falter. The mists grew steadily thicker, settling into a fog that sloshed over the water like a second skin.

Eventually Tarr set off towards North[A]. Only the very middle was submerged, which required fording. The hunter-tracker moved smoothly, letting his plates glide through the water. He crept up the south face of the isle and slipped over the lowzone. They led Tarr along the ridge for a time, bringing him east and then north. He paced beside them into the interior, hand pick drawn but held loose in his glove.

Drizzling began at noon and only grew stronger as the day pressed on. Soon the isle beneath him became a pedestal in the haze as the mist closed in on land. The tracks continued to meander before him, drawing the hunter further and further into the isle as evenings tendrils raised. He drifted north and west through the soaking dirt as the drizzle turned to rain. Steadily the markings softened at the angles. The ridges would be beat down as the ground grew more sodden.

Then came their end, leading to an earthen mound. He kept low, nearly crawling through the mud until he came upon its edge. It was an upraised ring thrice his height across. The walls were loose packed dirt. In the shallow depression was standing water. It splashed around Tarr's ankles as he stepped down into it.

In the middle lay the reedwalker. Rain had since purged mud from the shell, washing it clean and exposing the pale grey-tan of its underside and dangling arms. From between its head and shoulder sprouted a massive feathered arrow dripping with water. It was motionless and on its side, surrounded by thirty large rocks; glossy black spheres dotted with bony studs.

The pit and all within was flecked and splattered in the arthrichor of the reedwalker. The body was crumpled, half driven into the ground. Many of the reeds once upon its back were gone. Its rearmost leg was missing, hewn from where it had been joined to it. The other limbs curled inward limply. Its once glassy eyes were now a dull grey, hazy as the clouds hanging above the corpse.

Tarr rapped his pick against a rock. It was hard, but brittle, and did not ring up his hand like striking stone. Instead he felt a hollowness. Then it *kicked*, twitching in place like the solitary beat of a heart. A *thump* tickled the soles of his feet through his boots.

He tore his eyes away from the brood and back to the reedwalker. It lay at a slant, propped up by a wedge of mud. The grasping arms curled inward around the clusters, seeming to cradle them beneath it. Tarr stepped back from them, and walked around the fallen beast. Its carapace had been split open, hewn along the spine nearly in half. The edges were clean, and the chasm sunk deep into its body as if felled by a monstrous swordstroke. The wound opened towards the sky, drinking in the rain through a gaping maw. A puddle already thrived within, stirring a sickly-pungent slurry into the wet air.

He stepped around the eggs and leaned forward to reach at its underside. With the tip of his hook, Tarr caught one of the reedwalkers arms and lifted. There was a void in the center of its body that punched outward from the shell.

From the north came a faint clacking.

He dropped the limb and stepped back. It persisted but did not grow louder. Tarr struggled to hear the noise over the rainfall at times, but it never failed to reach his ears. He waited there as evening continued to climb higher into the sky. Quickly and using his tail to undo the loop, he took the helm from his hip. It guarded the top and back of his head, keeping out water with a leathered mask over the face.

He slipped it over his hair, cinching the collar of his armor around the collar of the helm. He locked the faceplate down and open, then got to his feet. The rain beat against his lenses, tapping on the glass ovals and rigid pipe running ovetop his skull. Though slightly muffled by the leather and woodwork helm, Tarr could hear the clacking. It was closer now, noticeably so.

Then came the *crack* of a lightless thunderbolt.

Tarr broke into a sprint, running straight to the edge of the nest and flinging himself down the outer slope. The tracks had been mostly washed away, leaving only a shallow ridge where the limbs once tore up the mud. He wiped at the lenses with his glove, smearing the beading drops away as he ran. Evening was full behind the sea above, and the last traces of day were banished from the clouds.

Soon the edge of the isle came into view, as did the drop. The gloam tide was high and churned with rain and fog. Tarr took a deep breath, and slammed the faceplate down, locking the seal. Then he leapt and dove, plunging into the water. He kicked off the flooded valley, surfacing into the dark. He exhaled hard, pushing at the cork capping the pipe. It popped open and carried

his breath with it. Cool wet air rushed in, filling his lungs as he paddled. Two sets of waves lapped at the ports over his eyes. Ducking his face back in, he scanned for anything in the water. He saw nothing but blackness.

*Date :: 6/2/9*

*Year :: R4.151*

*Survey :: Day 5 of 5*

*My bones are growing numb under this rainhide. I am glad to be out of it soon.*

*Everyone was up shortly after dawn. We ate our last breakfast and packed camp before crossing to East[S] during the low tide. The isle was very small, only half that of East[M].*

*The sea above is swirling in place. The flats here were far shallower than the others, and we crossed back to East[M] while the water rose. From there we followed the highzone northeast, to the point facing into the long valley.*

*We waited there until the tide let us cross. A drizzle started around noon and grew stronger through to evening. Once on the other side we traveled west where Tarr said to meet. We set the camp down to get it off our shoulders, and began the last leg of the survey.*

*East[L] sat between a bay to the southwest and the larger isles off its other shores. It was even and smooth, like the ends of two peninsulas forged together. At two points on the isle we came across tracks. They were first spotted by Fehn on the western end starting at the highzone. They were 'broad, smooth, and cut up' as she said. They traced along the north face until diving off into the mud.*

*The drizzle turned to rain as we began the second loop until it was the strongest we had seen. It came down straight through the air, not in the angled sheets of a seastorm. I am thankful*

*for the hide I wear, as it keeps me dry even if I shiver underneath. The weather slowed us, but we managed to finish ahead of evening. The fallen tide was low when we returned to camp. We lit the fire and fumesticks, then settled down for the night. Tarr has not appeared*

The clacking flowed through the rain and washed over his helm. He could not see from where, for he had no sight through the fogwash.

Tarr hung down in the brine, submerged in the bog almost entirely. He paddled backwards agonizingly slowly. The sound reached his ears again, but now it came from where the isle began to curve up and away. He waited patiently, listening as they grew distant and vanished.

He reached for his helm and tore the faceplate down to take deep gasps of rainy air. Then he turned and swam with his arms above the water. Seconds turned to minutes in the fog, the waves sloshing on his armor. It tugged on his belt, his boots and his gloves, yanking at his weapons.

Minutes dragged on. His arms grew heavy, and the kicking of his feet slowed to match pace. He pawed in front of him now, now slowing further until he was almost treading in place. Tarr fought to keep his breath under control for a moment, then heaved and threw himself back into the freestyle. For a moment he wondered if he was swimming into open water. Then his hand struck earth and he crashed into the bank of an isle. He clawed at the mud with his fingers and hauled himself onto wet land.

Tarr spat and wiped a clod of dirt off his mouth. Then he reached for his dagger and drew it. In two motions he cut the mask off at the cheeks. Then he folded it into a ball, burying the



lenses under leather. He dumped the water out of his sidebag and stowed it. Laed would have his head if he ruined any more lenses.

The hunter stood at the edge of the highzone with his back to the tide. It was falling, flowing out into the low night. Tarr was silent, breathing through his nose, eyes on the ground beneath him. Under his boot was the faintest trace of a mark, one only he could have seen. It was broad, and little remained but the smoothness of the mud.

Tarr realized he heard no chirps across the isles and waters. For once Kaeaul was quiet, save for the drum of steady rain.

## Chapter 8

The rowboat made landfall bearing fumesticks and firewood. It was helmed by Laed and Dosghru. They brought with them three rounds of wakendraught for the watches. Then Dosghru set off back to the Ossaeon. The captain would be remaining on the isles with the party. Fehn quickly brought them up to speed.

The party ate quietly. Evening passed into night and marched onward through low tide. Fehn, Laed, and Kariala were designated as the watches, but no one slept. Midnight came and went with no sign of Tarr. Daoss suggested those not on watch try and get rest or at least make the effort to. Being exhausted in the morning would do none of them good, Tarr least of all. Eventually the surf lulled them to sleep, leaving only three awake for the rest of the night.

Fehn had taken a walk around the camp and returned to a silent watch. She dropped her helm on the ground. It landed with a *splat* in the mud. The hunter stared up at the rain.

“Nothing.” She announced blandly. There was no response.

“So...” Fehn continued, sitting down at the campfire. “What next?”

Laed knew the question was for them. They too kept their eyes on the fire, watching smoke billow up and around the tent keeping rain off the logs.

“You, Roan and I set out in the morning to look for him.” They answered after a few moments. “Everyone else wait here. We’ll check in around the tides, and look until we find him.”

“If only we had a tracker in our party,” At Kariala’s remark Laed and Fehn snorted, “would make this a lot easier...”

“Imagine that.” Fehn said, still fixed on the fire. Minutes or hours could have passed in the silence.

“Laed,” Fehn sought to change the subject, even though it had died off, “what are the chartings looking like?”

“Nicer than usual.” The captain smiled dryly. “It’s strange to see a map of Kaeaul in color.”

“You know what she means.” Kariala interjected, though she too was interested in seeing the maps.

“Not great.” The captain steepled their fingers.

“I figured.” Fehn grumbled, twisting and sending pops up her spine. “How bad?”

“Could be worse.” A bedroll weighed in.

All eyes turned to it, which shuffled as Roan sat up and pulled the hood back over his head. The rain had slowed but was still coming down.

“Our problem is the North-South bridge.” Laed looked grim when lit from below by the fire. “It’s foundation set earlier than Riverun thought from the four-one fourty charting.”

“How much space between isles?” Roan asked.

“Not more than a kilometer. It blocks flow entirely at low tide.”

“So we’re going to be out here more.” Fehn stated rather than asked. Laed answered anyway.

“Yeah.” They sighed deeply. “Doehehn will recommend we set a post here soon. I’m thinking the tip of Isle South.”

“Then we’ll be dropping into port for a few days and heading right back out here.”

Kariala grumbled. Roan remained impassive.

They did not speak for the rest of the night.

*Date :: 7/2/9*

*Year :: R4.151*

*Survey :: Day 6 of 5*

*The rain fell back to a drizzle overnight and left a heavy mist over the bog.*

*Once everyone was awake, we split into two groups. Captain Laed set off west with Fehn and Roan in search of Tarr. I stayed at camp with Ferisen and Daoss.*

Eaehe sighed.

In her glove was the handcannon Laed had given her on the ship. It was the first time she had looked at it since. The hunters told her to fire it if need be. Before leaving, Laed warned Eaehe to point the muzzle up and away from herself, and to plug an ear with her finger. She did not need to be told that. Eaehe had been standing nearby when Roan fired his rifle two days before, and got ringing in the ears as recompense. She had no doubt every soul in the bog would hear it go off.

The tide was on its way in when the search party returned. They were without Tarr, and reported that the marks they encountered the day before were gone.

“We’ll head out again and soon.” Laed threw another log on the fire, and slapped the underside of the tent covering it, launching a spray of drops.

They drank from their skins of treated water, and finished off the last of their rations. The brine continued to rise, drawing closer and closer to the ridge of the highzone until the surf and rain drowned out the sounds of Kaeaul together. Having finished their last meal of the survey they began to discuss the next round of searches. Then Roan spotted movement east down the shore. He pointed at it, and called out. Soon they were all on their feet, with Laed and Fehn jumping down the embankment.

“That’s him!” Fehn yelled, spurring the party into movement. She and Laed cut directly through the shrinking flat while the rest followed along the ridge.

Tarr had only just crawled from the water by the time they were upon him, and raised both arms to wave.

“Hey!” He yelled, meeting hands with Fehn.

The two clapped each other on the back with force. Tarr was covered head to toe in mud and strands of plant. He was wearing his helm, but the faceplate and lenses had been cut away, and the cork at the end of the breathing pipe was out. His shoulders were slumped, and a heaviness sat under his eyes. He seemed unsteady on his feet, and his limbs moved slowly, as if made from lead. Still he was upbeat, and a grin split his face as he greeted the party.

“Good to see you all again, glad I could make it!” His comment fell flat with a particular surveyor.

“Took your damn time.” Ferisen gave him a look.

“Maybe I’ll walk backwards into the tide,” Tarr shot back, “and stay forever.”

“I’m glad you’re still alive.” Laed stepped between the two. “What kept you?”

“Something brought the reedwalker down east of here,” For a moment he kept his eyes on Ferisen as he spoke to Laed, “then I followed it all the way through North[A].”

“And you found it?”

“Most of it.” His tone grew steeley, the captain's brow furrowed. “It was lying in a nest”

“Nest?” Laed’s expression soured even further, and a grimace spread across the party.

“With eggs?”

“Big ones, and a lot. Never seen any like them before.” Tarr held out his hands, approximating their size.

“Coloring?” This time it was Eaehe who spoke up. She had started a new page in her logbook, and was transcribing the words of the two hunters.

“Solid black with white spots all over.” A look fell over Tarr’s face. He kept his thoughts to himself, but the reality of unrecognized eggs set him on edge.

“You can lead us to the nest, right?” Fehn cut in. The tracker nodded.

“Aye.” He pointed across the isle. “The valley between East[L] and North[A] is shallow. We can cross before the tide is fully out.”

All were in agreement, even Ferisen. He was far from keen to spend more time out in the bog but the prospect of a novel discovery on the doorstep of Keiyad could be too great for the Holt to pass up. *And who knows what they’d do with it.*

Tarr led them north. They came to the crossing, where yesterday Fehn had observed the marks passing down into the mudflat. The tide was no longer rising, but they were forced to wait as Daoss predicted. Only three of them wore lignothorax, and while rainhides excelled at keeping one dry, water above the waist could seep in and fill the boots.

Eventually the water dropped enough for them to cross and they waded through the brine. At its deepest in the middle it lapped about the thighs, but with the direction of Tarr and Fehn the

party avoided deep patches and so remained dry beneath their layers. Eaehe held her bag overhead, keeping the papers out of the bog.

They clambered out of the water and over the ridge. The tracks were entirely gone, washed away by the rain that continued to fall around them. Tarr led them into the interior where the mist grew thin and bare. They could see the mound of earth ahead of them. The party walked up its shallow slope and gazed into the nest. The body of the reedwalker was still there. So too were the eggs, each the size of ones torso and speckled with bone-white studs.

Fehn whistled. “This is a big nest...”

“That it is...” Laed dug their shortspear into the sides of it.

They wrenched the haft to the side, spilling the mud out of the embankment into the standing greenish water. There was something packed into the mound. Laed reached in with their gloves, and scraped away the dirt to reveal a piece of shell. It was stuck firmly in the earthen mound, bound in a dense root matrix beneath the surface layers.

“That’s from a droznator.” Eaehe kneeled beside the hunter-captain. “It’s a piece of backplate.”

Laed ripped it from the wall of the nest with a grunt, and held the cross section up to the scribe. It had crisp edges, coming to a series of splintering points at each end. The topside was dark and heavily textured, coated with bump-stippled ridges.

“From the top of the abdomen.” Laed affirmed, holding it out to Eaehe. They pointed a finger at the bottom, and she set a pencil to the tablet. The underside was a pale brown, its surface smooth to the touch beneath the film of mud and clods of dirt.

“Interior carapace is clean, but the roots haven’t degraded the flesh-liner. This kill was made less than a week ago and buried immediately.” Their words scratched against the rough paper in slender-lined shorthand.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if we found the rest of it in the walls.” They gestured to the circle encompassing them. “The ground has fused with the ridge, and is holding water at the interior of Isle North[A].”

They frowned then called to Ferisen.

“How far are we from the southern end?”

The surveyor paused, doing the rough estimating in his head.

“A measure and a half or so, not more than two!” He called back from the other side of the nest.

“I’ll call it at one and three quarters.” Eaehe mumbled. Laed hummed in agreement.

Noon came and left with the rain. A terse bout of professionalism had settled over the party from which none were exempt. Fehn, Tarr, and Kariala spoke of the wounds dealt to the reedwalker in hushed tones and neutral faces. Daoss and Roan inspected both the arrow in its collar and the stoneshot wound. Meanwhile Ferisen and Laed measured the nest, noting width, depth of water, and height of embankments.

Noon had passed by the time Eaehe shut her tablet. None but her seemed to realize afternoon was upon them and moving quick. She turned to Laed

“If we start back now, the tide will be with us for the rest of the day.”

“Agreed.” The captain paused, then spoke to her again. “How many eggs?”

“Twenty nine. Err, wait...” Then Eaehe flipped the tablet back open and glanced at a page. “...Thirty.”



“Tarr!” They abruptly called to the tracker, who perked up at their voice. “Pick one to take with you!”

“Are you sure we should do that?” Ferisen watched the hunter lift the egg, holding it like a barrel.

“There’s two dozen and then some here. Whatever laid them en masse shouldn’t notice.” Even as the captain spoke, their hand drifted to their side, coming to rest on the hilt of their arming sword. “Even if it does, we’re not sticking around to find out.”

Ferisen shrugged. He already knew they’d be back out here eventually. He also knew that *he* wouldn’t. *Not any time soon at least.*

The party set off back towards East[L]. Fehn led them with Tarr beside her, egg in his arms. Soon they were back at camp.

Tarr his prize down in a patch of soft mud well behind the lowzone. It held the egg firmly. Their things were as they left them, only with a dead fire. They packed quickly, shaking the water out of tarps, tents and sleeping covers. Tarr asked if anyone wanted to carry the egg. Ferisen was happy to take it from the hunter.

Laed kicked a measure of dirt into the white coals, burying the ash. Only a single log remained in the leather sack. Though still fairly dry, it had begun to grow soft to the touch. The hunter-captain took it out, and set the wood down over the buried fire, sticking it upright in the dirt. Beside them was Roan. The two shared a moment of quiet before following the crew.

The Ossaeon had moved again. The tide was still on its way out, but had lowered enough to show the lowzone bank. The ship was now further north, moored by one of the small isles just offshore. The party crossed over the ridge for the last time, following the receding water to the edge. From there they would start rowing things and people back.

Fehn reached the water first, flanked by Tarr. Laed was not far behind and had their sword drawn. The two waded out into the brine, probing for the furthest reaches of the lowzone before it dropped into open bogwater. Their weapons were out, Fehn with her hook and Tarr with his pick. He kept one of his hands free, but near to his dagger. They both tapped at the ground, though Tarr did so with lethargy. He was glad to be back in the water and welcomed the weight that it took off him.

Soon the two of them came to a little ridge. It went down slightly but was not the drop of the land's edge. Fehn found it first, but Tarr soon strode over to check it out. Words hadn't even formed before she lunged for him. It was no use, for he had already set his full weight on a rock in the mud.

Then the water exploded around him.

## Chapter 9

Something slammed into his left side, knocking Tarr down into the water and driving the wind from his chest. Black fuzz danced in his eyes and rang in his ears. There was a clamp fixed around his torso, and a stabbing pain under his armor. His right shoulder felt as if it had been caught between a hammer and anvil.

His boots ground through the mud until his footing was back. He kept his stance wide and twisted the nefarions head. He drew his dagger and stabbed across his body, sinking the blade into the underside of its neck. It screeched, buzzing so loud it drowned out the splashing of water nearing it.

Fehn leapt and swung her greathook, bringing it over her head and straight down. The sickle *crunched* into its back like an axe in wood. She pulled herself onto its back while Laed tackled one of the rear legs. It stumbled, and from dry land came the sound of a bowstring snapping. The arrow sailed through the air, glanced off its thorax, and spun into the water. Fehn ripped the hook out and swung again, driving the point through the base of a mandible. It screamed and clawed at Tarr, scraping with heavy-taloned forelimbs.

Roan crouched in the mud, right leg braced in the ground. The stock of his rifle sat in the dished plate on his shoulder, its end leveled on a little black target. Fehn pulled back with her hook, wrenching the head up. The blast sundered the air, spitting a gout of smoke trailed fire

from the barrel. It *whistled* by Tarr's face and lanced through and snapping its head to the side. It shuddered, collapsing into the brine.

Fehn leapt for the front of it and grabbed the locked mandibles. She pried them open, throwing the limbs apart with such force their sockets shattered. Kariala lunged through the water, dragging Tarr up while Fehn and Laed heaved the lifeless beast to the side. Tarr was pulled into the air and threw a hand backwards, grabbing at a rainhide gauntlet. His other was not moving.

Laed dragged the nefarion behind them. Its mouth hung limply from its eyeless head. Arthrichor flowed from it, sloshing out of its sockets and maw, staining the water green.

“By the *Hewn Lords* will you stay out of their jaws for a minute?” Kariala barked out through gritted teeth. She hauled him out of the brown slurry and dropped him on his back against the matting of the lowzone.

“Hey!” Tarr protested. “At least this one didn't bite me in the face!”

She ignored him. The surgeon drew a blade from an inner pocket and set to work. Now well out of the water, the cold surrounding him fell, and warmth spread beneath the plate. Going right through the middle was a clean hole the size of his thumb surrounded by a web of cracks spreading outward. Kariala had little doubt the backplate would look any different.

“Hold still. And be glad you had the sense to lean back this time. It would have gone through your neck otherwise.” She brought the wicked edge to his neck, and bit into the collar of his suit.

The plates comprising the right shoulder, chest and back fell away. A reddish splotch decorated the underside of the layer, and dripped audibly onto the muddy ground. Then Kariala sliced into the gambeson underneath and finally the wicking layer below that. The warmth Tarr

felt suddenly vanished, replaced by the brisk coolness of misty air. He blinked away from the red, eyes turning to the knife still hacking away at his armor.

“Carved up like a side of duroq...” Tarr muttered. Kariala snorted.

“You still think it falls apart like this by accident?” She grabbed him by the remaining back of the collar and lifted him, throwing the piece of armor to the side as Roan slipped a bedroll beneath him. Then she laid him down on it.

“Here, look at the knife.” She held it out.

Tarr took it from her gloved hand and looked it over. It was simply built and bereft of decoration. The single edge was tall and slender, with a dulled back that curled around to lop off the point.

Kariala splashed something strong-smelling onto his chest, which stung. She tilted him forward, letting the remaining spirit run out. Then she splashed some on the rear wound, her grip on the armored collar turning to iron as he flinched. Then she poked it with a gloved finger, first the hole in his back, then the one in his chest. Tarrs swearing fell on deaf ears. The front puncture was deeper. The other had stopped on bone, but not before breaking off a chip. Her tail flicked open a crimson bag.

She took out a leatherbound jar and popped the top off. It was filled with rolls of cloth suspended in yellow goo. The smell of honey reached them both a moment later. Tarr squeezed his eyes shut, bringing his hand up to bite down on the thumb of his glove. Kariala packed the wound as quickly as she could, unraveling the cloth and stuffing it in. She pressed in hard with her thumbs until no more could fit and blood no longer welled to the top. Then the surgeon leaned him forward to be held upright by Roan and Fehn. Kariala passed Fehn a disk of leather from her bag, and moved to the other side while Fehn pressed it against his chest.

Daoss and Ferisen heaved the rowboat up beside the hunter while she packed the other wound. The Ossaeon had heard Eaehe's shot, and Dosghru arrived on the lowzone just as Kariala set another pad against Tarr and began applying pressure to his back.

"Get him to the ship!" Laed shouted from beside Kariala as she relieved Fehn of keeping pressure.

They and the surgeon lifted him by the shoulders while Roan and Eaehe held him by the legs. Those on their feet stepped into the boat while Daoss and Ferisen held it steady and laid Tarr down on the floor with his right shoulder up.

"Ferisen!" The captain prompted him aboard.

Ferisen had set the egg down in the lowzone and hopped in beside Kariala. He and Eaehe kept him steady while Laed and Fehn pushed. Within moments it was setting off, and Fehn vaulted herself over the sides, taking the spot beside Dosghru. They threw her one of the oars, and together the boat tore through the water, drawing nearer and nearer every second.

"How. Bad?" Dosghru spoke between strokes, eyes firmly on the approaching ship.

"Not good." Kariala answered, quickly glancing beneath the leather pads. The one on Tarr's chest now had a crimson dot in the center, one that was spreading outward slowly.

"...missed, his throat..." He trailed, voice quiet and shaky.

"A shame," Ferisen grumbled as he kept the barely conscious hunter steady, "here I was thinking the Lord's had shut you up for a second!"

Fehn let out a bark of laughter from the bench beside Eaehe. Then Dosghru dug one of the oars into the water, turning the boat to the side. It knocked against the Ossaeons wooden planking.

"Hey! Starboard!!" Dosghru yelled, thumping against the ship with an oar.

The heads of Gerrel and Kabehehn appeared beside the ladder. They looked down into the boat, their faces grim. The two went over the side, hanging from the bannister by their tails.

“Send him up!” Gerrel shouted, both holding their arms out.

Kariala and Ferisen lifted Tarr, passing the left shoulder of his armor to them. They pulled him up by the collar and good arm, then set him down on the deck. Kariala flew up after, rushing alongside as they carried him down into the hold.

The sounds of rain tapped through the deck and echoed into the cabin below.

Two lanterns swayed from the ceiling. Together they cast a steady light on the theatre. In the center was a long table with a tall stool beside it. Lower down was a rack of towels and a second, smaller table. The angled walls came from the prow, their shelves lined with assorted vials, bandages, and tiny bladed knives. The flooring was heavily lacquered and squeaked underfoot.

Tarr laid face down on the table, head turned to the side to avoid crushing his nose into the stiff leather. It felt like the suggestion of padding, and did little to cushion the reality of laying on an operating table. His left arm was pinned uncomfortably beneath his torso, holding a bandage firmly against his chest wound.

The nature of the injuries meant that the sides pushed together once the mandibular fangs were removed. That made the sewing light work for Kariala. The silver needle she wielded was long and pointed. Her ‘thread’ was tendon from the back of a duroq’s calf. The finger thick cords were shaved into hair like strands, then woven together. It was soft and cool to the touch. Kariala stored the spools in moss-jars and packed them in with the dewey greenery to keep them pliable. They had likely been harvested last week.

“If you work any slower it’ll close on its own.” Tarr spoke between a pause she took while the ship turned hard to starboard. She gave him a strong poke below the wound, turning his sight black.

“Shouldn’t you be bleeding right now?” Kariala resumed her sewing without so much as a glance. She had since dropped her gloves and rainhide, now wearing a stiff-collared linen with the sleeves rolled to her elbows and a smooth apron over that.

“I’ll try harder.” He got out while his vision returned. His hand pressing down. “Do I still need to hold this?”

The surgeon let his question hang in the air while she dunked the needle into a jar of spirits, then rethread it with another length of tendon.

“Probably not.” She answered, taking the patch from under his hand.

His arm fell limp and he sighed.

“Alright.” She severed the threat with a flick of the blade coiled in her tail and tied the last suture off. “Resin time.”

Tarr stuck his face into the false pillow and groaned loudly.

“I’m so excited to open it!” There was a gleam in her eye and a smile on her face as she cradled the barrel. “Look! This came from across the seas!”

The wound resin was stored in a small barrel the size of a hand. Seared into the wood was the sigil of a blazing, straight-trunked tree. Below was a small label with inked text.

It read: **BARRELED Γ4·118 : DRIMM, HARTH**

Kariala cracked the seal and popped the top, filling the cabin with a strong woody tang. It smelled cold and carried a sharpness that tingled the nose.



“That is lovely.” The surgeon sighed. “Do stay dry after, I would like to keep this vintage around for a while.”

Then she dunked a linen square in the amber-brown goo. It did not flow and instead held its shape. Tarr sighed, willing his back to not tense. She pressed the patches to the wound, sealing the wound and thread. Then she covered it with a few squares, hiding the glue with cloth.

“Help me make this quick.” Then she directed him to roll. Another few squares went into the resin, then to his chest, then more cloth.

“Sit up.” Kariala rolled her eyes as he complained.

She wrapped a new bandage-roll around him. It wound over his collars then around his back and under his arm. Then she tied it off so it hugged the side of his torso tight.

“Keep that arm down and don't pick anything up.” Kariala wiped her hands with the last of the untouched towels at the clear sound of footfalls coming down the narrow stairway to the hold. Someone made their way through the adjacent cabin and knocked on the bulkhead.

“Come in!” She called. The door opened to the captain, still wearing their lignothorax.

“Has he died yet?” Fehn's voice followed Laed into the room. Tarr let out a solitary laugh.

“Not yet, but don't lose hope.” Kariala called back while she gestured for Tarr to turn around.

He was lightheaded so it took time, but Laed approved the lack of bloodstains.

“How bad is it?” At their question the surgeon waved their hand noncommittally.

“It isn't great.” Then she pointed to the wound on his back. “Hit bone here, knocked a piece out and probably cracked his shoulder blade.”

“Ouch.” Laed sympathized. Tarr responded with a quiet ‘*yeah*’, then was directed to turn around again.

“The fang went deep here but missed his ribs.” Then Kariala looked at Tarr. “This is going to take a while to heal.”

“And what about *you*?” Laed’s question was directed to him this time. He shrugged, then winced, then shrugged only his right shoulder.

“Everything left of here is pain.” Tarr put his hand in the center of his chest.

“Any numbness?” Kariala asked. Tarr shook his head.

“No.” He wiggled his fingers and bent his arm tenderly. “Hurts, bad. But I can move them. Elbow too.”

“Then consider yourself lucky. Keep down until we’re moored.” Laed quietly let out a sigh through their nose before turning back to Kariala. “Let’s get him to a bunk.”

Tarr waved them off and managed to get to his feet but sat back down as static washed over him. He waited for a moment, then took a deep breath and stood up again. He followed Laed back through the bulkhead into the crew cabin. Kariala stepped through the doorframe behind him. The room was full but silent. Sitting at the table were Fehn and Ferisen. Daoss laid in his bunk, sleeping with the hood of his cloak pulled over his eyes.

The bunks ranged the gamut from tidy to destroyed. Tarr made his way to the second most unruly of the nine, and laid down. Kariala took a seat at the table next to Fehn, slumping against it. He shut his eyes and sent an upraised thumb their way. Laed encourage her to get some rest soon, and walked through the door on the far side of the cabin. They crossed through into the hold, pushing past barreled rations, planks, rope and canvas. Up the stairs was a narrow

armor hallway with sets of tools and basic weapons. Below was the sub-hold, which ran the length of the ship.

The captain followed the stairs, then walked through passage and out the doorway onto the deck. The weather turned again and came down stronger than earlier. Already the isles had disappeared into the fog. The water was open while land grew thin and far between. The Ossaeon was well underway, making for the port of Keiyad as quick as it could.

The nest seemed to shirk away in its presence. Clustered along its mouth were many gifts; nighttime offerings for its brood. Its long jaws opened, and from them fell eleven droznator. The tiny arthrids piled into the water, splashing around the eggs. The pack was fresh and would keep them warm through most of the nights rain. More would be needed soon.

Then it returned to its work. With heavy, shearing bites it cut the reedwalker into pieces, snipping the remaining arms off where they joined its body. It dragged them to the edge and ripped at a slope of the nest with its talons. Then it tucked the limbs into the dirt, and pierced a dozen tiny holes through the shells with its beak tip. In minutes there were countless roots poking through to rainy air, probing like worms trapped in amber until they began to latch in the wounds.

It clawed the earth back over it, thumping with its slender head until it was packed down and hidden. Suddenly it stopped, and grew still.

The scent of absence tickled at its brain. Sniffing first by instinct and then by intent, it wheeled on the nest, burning eyes yellow and glittering in the dark. It brought its head low to the mud and tasted the wet air. Then again, sweeping over the clutch lying in the pool. It felt gently

with the side of its beak, tapping the glossy surface of each individual in turn. Clattering burst from it between nudges.

Soon it tapped the last one and froze. That was wrong to it, but how was not yet known. It sniffed again, deeper and closer, drawing a hollow breath up its nose. There was something else. Amid the absence there was a presence, distant but recognized. Then it felt hunger, and clattered again.

Jawparts shrieked open, shearing planes grinding together as it threw its head back. From its maw burst a piercing scream that cut through the dark and soared across the bog. Its lash cracked, and a snap of lightless thunder rippled through Kaeaul.