

THE REALMS OF WATER

Robert Reed

Robert Reed tells us, “Late in life, I’ve developed an unexpected fondness for Roman history. And more specifically, I’m gradually reading the nonfiction of Adrian Goldsworthy. I like Goldsworthy for his pragmatic tone and his unabashed fascination for the lost empire. After reading his account of the Carthagian wars, a thought problem offered itself to me: What would Hannibal’s favorite elephant tell us if he wrote an account of his struggles? But of course the elephants didn’t last long in Italy and were never critical weapons in the major battles. I decided it would be better to move the action off-world, and my instincts told me to go with the Great Ship and an open-ended account by a narrator who seems to have lived an amazing life. ‘The Realms of Water’ is the result.”

1

Three days into their journey, and the strangers—humans and one janusian couple—felt as if they had become respectable friends. A convincing illusion, and essential. The male janusian, rooted firmly into his wife’s broad back, was eager to outline the situation. “Three cycles, and now we know each other’s voice,” he said with his quick whispery and entirely charming voice. “A few carefully groomed, glancingly personal stories have been shared, and everyone has watched everyone react to these tales, and armed with fresh impressions, we have collected many fine reasons for affection. For comfort. And what about traits that we don’t find appealing? Complaints scarcely matter at this point. After all, there is no more patient entity in the universe than the seasoned tourist. Traveling for pleasure has its traditions and laws, and the first law is to act polite. In all occasions, civility leads the way. So here we sit, eager to be happy, persuading ourselves that we are splendid friends, and isn’t this the most wonderful adventure that we have ever known?”

A pause, too brief for anyone else to speak. Then the parasitic husband continued. “But suppose this lovely event doesn’t obey our schedule. What if we find ourselves trapped in this cabin for another thirty cycles? Courteous impulses are going to give way to fatigue. What began as a tiny quirk becomes a flaw, and tempers will reveal themselves, if only with that sharp little glance or the curse muttered while asleep. And the worst crime of all? We’ll repeat ourselves. No, we won’t tell the same stories,

no. We're far too clever for that. But our favorite themes are going to be revealed, and our lazy tendencies, and this audience will begin to anticipate what comes next. Plus it bears mentioning that some of us, perhaps all of us, hold perversions. Political faiths and tiny biases that usually mean nothing to our true friends. But these bodies sitting here, these shapes pushed so close together, are not our friends. Not after thirty cycles of synthesized rations, brackish water, and a toilet designed by creatures who know nothing at all about piss or shit."

A little laugh. Then, "Now imagine that we remain trapped inside this minuscule space for even longer. Oh, let's say for the next three hundred cycles. I guarantee, it won't matter how noble and decent each one of you believes yourself to be. You will come to hate everyone else. Indeed, after three hundred cycles inside this miserable cabin, you'll find yourself wanting the strange old lady in back to please, please step outside and die. And why? Because you've grown so tired—all of us are so very tired—of that goddamn endless smile of hers."

The janusian fell silent, and everyone else laughed.

Loudest of all was the old woman sitting in back.

Of course that three-hundred-day scenario was ridiculous. There was a strict itinerary, and another five days would bring them to their destination: The City of Copper Salts. This enforced period of good moods and inspired jokes had to survive just that long. The janusian was reminding everyone about these rules, and feeling confident, the seven humans laughed in that peculiar fashion of theirs. Then the cabin's recycle system woke again, loud and urgent, and the sauna temperatures were pushed down a little ways, the air refreshed just enough so that the next breaths weren't entirely stale.

This tiny cabin was sacred space. Eight travelers—janusian couples counted as an individual—had bought permission to visit a famously exotic metropolis. But that meant crossing a desert that was owned by an alien species. The Grand Many were ancient and stubborn giants who rarely invited outsiders onto their lands. And why was that? Because the tiny creatures of the universe were contemptible, and to underscore that self-evident fact, they demanded an eight-day journey inside an inadequate space, every seat filled, the life support system carefully engineered to be barely adequate. What's more, they were being carried by a slow and exceedingly clumsy machine, its body designed to be ugly, salt-stained ceramic plates laid around a crude fission pile that could have used more shielding. Six pillar-like legs operated with a measure of independence, each limb stepping where it wished, leaving the ride jolting and uneven. Inspired to walk, a woman wouldn't fall far behind. The same old lady, running steadily, might reach the City two days ahead of the others. But that assumed that the desert was merely oven-hot and the atmosphere was marginally breathable, and neither was true here. So the travelers had two choices: To sit inside the cabin and converse, or sit here while being politely silent, laughing when there was cause, and always watching a landscape unlike any other onboard the Great Ship.

The Grand Many had come from a giant terran world. More precisely, they evolved on the world's water-starved equator. Belonging to one of the rarer categories of life, their physiology was built from nonaqueous tissues—silicone and spun-carbon and iron. In place of stomachs and lungs, they carried reservoirs of pressurized water infused with complex salt compounds. These slurries offered stored potentials and steady discharges. The Grand Many were living batteries, feeding on sunlight, and, at night, infrared radiation. But that didn't give enough power to busy animals. It was the salty black vegetation that generated surpluses, but instead of eating leaves and pulp, the natives were sucklers. Spent juices were traded for charged juices, using mouths that resembled mosquito suckers and ancient power plugs—two details that a very old woman might recall while sitting alone in the backmost seat.

Three days crossed, and the Grand Many hadn't made an appearance. Hot and miserable as this climate was, the atmosphere was still too thin and far too wet for their comfort, while the desert foliage was sickly and weak compared to everything that was coming. Yet what the travelers saw was spectacular. Towering black slabs resembled tombstones standing in clusters or alone, always facing dawn and dusk. These were pastures of living panels that were full of iron pyrites and lithium salts, and grassy plants that fed on wind as well as the radiation. Every shadow seemed to hide a native, but sometimes one brave fellow would step into the open to stare at this intentionally awful vehicle. And likewise, the trapped, helpless cargo would stare back at him. The natives were often two-legged and covered with a polished onyx-like carapace, mechanical muscles and those burly iron skeletons adapted to a crushing gravity that didn't exist here. And like the Grand Many, they had faces with tear-shaped eyes and complex mouths that were not mouths, and arms ending with fingers, and a remarkable capacity to stand motionless now and perhaps for days to come.

Laughter and chatter ended, and then the next steep ridge was crossed. The machine was painfully slow on the climb and even slower when it descended, and after a stretch of easier open ground, the six legs fought their way up a long wind-eroded slope, reaching what proved to be a plateau. The illusionary sun was directly overhead, K-class and relatively tiny in the sky. This furnace heat was produced by the dense carbon dioxide atmosphere, which was why the nights were exactly as unbearable as the days. On flat ground, the machine managed a slightly, slightly faster pace, lumbering its way across a field of blackish fans, flushing little creatures that were nothing like birds or bugs—solar-cell wings fueling leaps and gliding motions that carried them away from what would never be a threat.

Microphones on the cabin's exterior captured every sound, and there was nothing to hear but the slow fierce wind.

There was no silencing the outside world.

Through it all, the ancient woman smiled. She smiled because she was honestly happy. In this group and probably in most gatherings, her voice would be the last to complain, and everyone had sensed as much from the beginning.

The janusian couple sat in front of her.

If he wished, the alien husband could pivot his head and shrunken torso, looking forward. But staring at the smiling woman was easiest.

He whispered her name, or at least the name that she had shared with the others.

She replied with bright eyes and a little nod.

He said to her, "You appreciate my thoughts."

The husband was plainly searching for compliments. Which was the easiest gift in the world. Pleasant words aimed at the pleasant companion, and of course she thanked him for being so entertaining. "Joyous truth. That's what you offer, free of charge."

Maybe he heard more than intended.

Or perhaps this was his plan from the start.

"But if you wish, please, add to my notions," he offered. "Three cycles, thirty cycles, and so on."

Janusians were relatively common onboard the Great Ship, but this woman didn't know the species as well as she wanted, and she doubted she ever would. One sex was rooted into the body of the spouse, rather like the anglerfish from the Earth. Except the parasitic body was male only half of the time, and in most cases, the dominant partner wasn't the larger one. That withered entity was most likely to speak and most likely to set priorities, and these janusian unions seemed profoundly happy in ways that humans would never experience.

Why was that such a pleasant thought?

"Madam," said the alien husband. Then his surviving arm, tiny but full of charac-

ter, waved as if to gather up her attentions. "To know each other thoroughly. How long would we would have to live inside this cabin to reach that stage?"

"Oh," she said. "That would never happen."

"No?"

"Because of secrets," she said.

"What secrets are those?"

A forty-thousand-year-old hand was extended, touching her companion's final two fingers. "I can't help but assume that you have your mysteries. Private thoughts kept from everyone, including your wife. And your wife, bless her, has wonders that she keeps out of your reach too."

The human expected laughter.

There was none, and the tiny alien face showed no reaction.

Then the old woman delivered another honesty. "Everyone is a puzzle to everyone else," she stated. "More than gravity, more than time. Ignorance is the fundamental, most wondrous principle behind this universe of ours."

The withered gentleman appeared genuinely startled.

It was the wife with the broad back who laughed. Not just loudly and not just for a polite while, but whistling in the janusian fashion, right up until their clumsy machine fell into a hidden hole, shattering two of its legs.

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2

Quee Lee was born into a world of privilege and boundless opportunity. Centuries later, arriving on the Great Ship as one kind of traveler, she happily fulfilled the role of the wealthy single human surrounded by her own untested kind. But then she met and married a genuine adventurer, and the subsequent millennia made her into a significantly different person. This journey was a prime example. Quee Lee's husband had some odd, possibly less-than-legal business in the City of Copper Salts, and knowing none of the details, Quee Lee decided to surprise him with a visit. Which was why she wore a fictional name and a minimal disguise, and that's why her fellow passengers knew so little about the lady in their midst.

Then the ugly machine crippled its two front legs, and in the subsequent chaos, it was the old woman who remained calm.

"What do we do?"

Everyone else asked that obvious question. First speaking to the automated driver, and when no answer was offered, turning to one another.

"What can we do?"

No one had a working nexus—another mandatory rule stipulated by the Grand Many. Even the AI driver was forbidden to shout for help. But Quee Lee's husband had taught her how to stockpile information before even the smallest walk, and that's why she said nothing, studying maps of this cavern system, examining the illusionary walls and false sky in hopes of identifying shelter in this marvelous desert, or if need be, some means of escape.

But their machine proved more competent than anticipated. After a long series of clattering hums, the four remaining limbs lifted the body from the pit. Its front legs were useless, yes, but at least they were standing now, and that poise seemed to give the driver enough courage to finally speak.

"I will go on," that very simple mind promised. "I predict success and only nineteen cycles behind schedule."

But was that the best solution?

The other humans invested time and breath wishing for the impossible. Rescue crews riding fat-wheeled vehicles. Swift, large, thoroughly air-conditioned saviors. Meanwhile, the janusians remained silent. Perhaps, like Quee Lee, they were concerned about their ride's durability and the ramifications of a second mishap. Repairs would be welcome, but there weren't any official waystations. According to schedules set before they embarked, no second walking machine would catch them in any reasonable time, and even if they were spotted, the next walker would be just as overloaded as theirs was.

"There are two possibilities."

Those words were offered, and nobody noticed. Then Quee Lee said nothing more, and her fellow passengers began to look back at her serious smirk. Even the female janusian turned, showing off her beautiful profile, including two of her eyes and a mouth that wasn't too different from human mouths. "Possibilities?"

"First, there's a private residence," said Quee Lee. "Not in view, but it will be. After we drop off this plateau, bear to the right, cross the valley and climb the next ridge. Which isn't a ridge. We'll have to scramble up one of the cavern walls, but from what I can tell, there's a microclimate perched up high. It's wetter and cooler, with a home—"

"Someone's house?" asked a human. A man.

"That's what I see," she reported, tapping her temple. "A single tenant, and that's all I know."

"But who would live out here?" another man asked.

"And what good could this person do?" the first fellow wanted to know.

"I doubt it's a person," a woman mentioned.

Everyone stared at the old lady, waiting for information. Opinions. Or at least some optimistic noise.

Quee Lee muted her smile, and with a serious tone, she explained what everyone should already know. "The Grand Many have a code of conduct. Beg for help, do it in the proper manner, and they cannot turn away a stranger."

"But it can't be one of 'them,'" another passenger insisted. "They're too social to live alone."

That was what the literature claimed, yes.

But Quee Lee had a second option to consider. "Or we can be rescued in the next few hours."

"Rescued how?" everyone asked.

"Step outdoors," she said. "Without breathers or refrigerating suits, we drop into the furnace, cook our bodies and die. For fifty days, a thousand days. They'll eventually find our mummified corpses, and our rescuers will carry us somewhere wet and cool, and we'll be made whole again. Maybe twenty years from now. But from our point of view, not more than two days will pass."

Temporary deaths weren't a serious bother. Quee Lee's long, fascinating life with an unusual husband had taught her that.

But these companions couldn't embrace that kind of helplessness.

A vote was subsequently taken, and given unified instructions, the AI obeyed the passengers' commands. And that was how Quee Lee, wearing an assumed name, soon found her way to the Great Surus.

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The promised home seemed to be nothing but eroded stone walls scattered along the windswept ridge, like the bones of much larger structures that had been kicked

down by time or fits of temper, the rubble subsequently carried away. But there was a cavity below the ridge, tilted downward and leading to a sealed doorway. That passageway was taller than ten men standing on one another's shoulders. The ground was polished smooth by steady use, but there was no trace of any resident. Dressed in breathers and refrigerated clothes, everyone stood together, and briefed by Quee Lee, they spoke to the door with a shared voice, explaining their plight and wishes.

Nothing changed.

Because it could only help, Quee Lee kneeled and then confessed that she was tiny, perched on the brink of nonexistence. Did this mighty entity wish to help her and her kind? Or, at least, was there some way to send comforting words to the City, to her tiny loving husband who would become weak with worry when she didn't arrive?

No answer was earned, unless it was that brief gust of hot wind that found them inside that hole. The only sound was the hard breathing of trapped souls. Even dressed in refrigerated clothes, standing in the underground shade, the humans had soaked their clothes with perspiration, while the janusians dumped spare heat into the various fins that were deployed only in miserable times. Nobody was happy. That was undeniable. It was easy to assume that nobody was home today and perhaps not for a hundred years. It was harder to believe that they could climb back inside their machine and return to the main route. This final climb had damaged another one of the limbs—the right middle leg—and that makeshift nonsense of ceramics and nuclear fire was teetering, barely able to maintain its balance even while it was doing nothing.

They should beg somewhere else, maybe. Maybe there was a door that hadn't been found yet.

Quee Lee stepped back into the open, squinting at the false sun. Another hour and night would arrive, the false sky offering the possibility of three moons and a rich array of stars.

"Where are you going?" one man asked.

Every voice was muted by a breathing mask.

Quee Lee started to point, offering a destination. Which was when the doorway unsealed itself. A hiss and humming could be heard. The gap was tiny and open for a moment, only just long enough for a pair of wheeled robots to emerge. One and then the other robot spoke. "We will repair what we can and improve what we can, and we'll wish you nothing but good fortune on every journey from here."

There. Success in the offing, and everyone laughed.

Neither robot spoke again. Until night, there was nothing to do but rest in the shadows, watching busy limbs sprout tools and peel back the ceramics, those exposed servos and cables looking utterly primitive in comparison to every normal mechanical device.

Night came, but every moon was absent, the darkness rich despite the stars. Obeying a three-day-old habit, the tourists sat together, talking about imaginary meals and cool winds and the cold water that would slake a thirst that felt intense if not urgent. But of course everyone was immortal, and these uncomfortable bodies were filled with elaborate, overlapping metabolisms that slept until necessary—hidden capacities that would maintain their present lives. For months, if necessary.

It was early in the evening when Quee Lee stood and walked off.

She wasn't noticed or she was. Either way, no one called out to her.

Walking in the darkness proved difficult. It was good that this wealthy lady had worthy boots and the proper attitude. Two spills and a quick-healed gash on the forehead carried her over the ridge. Another hundred meters and the world ended with cultured granite or perhaps pure hyperfiber. But convincing illusions were woven into that surface, including a cool little wind that almost tasted like rain. And just

for a moment, Quee Lee considered telling the others to come here and wait with her, enjoying the most pleasant air inside the cavern.

Then a voice spoke.

“You are not small,” it said to her.

A soft voice, but also huge. As much a rumble as it was words, the sound and shake of it passing over the human and then vanishing. No one else could have heard those words.

“Next to me, you are vast,” the voice said.

He said.

That impression meant nothing, or it was essential. She was hearing the Ship’s common tongue, which was human speech, and little cues in the diction implied a quality translator operating synthetic lips, a smart tongue, plus a long throat and genuine lungs.

But the only lungs here were Quee Lee’s.

“Why am I vast?” she asked.

That triggered laughter. Deep, persistent, and convincingly amused.

“You are a very old specimen of your kind, and your kind is infesting the galaxy with your offspring and your culture.” Then he added, “And of course it’s the vast humans who own and rule the Great Ship.”

The largest starship ever built. Older than the stars and discovered wandering outside the galaxy, empty and free for the taking.

“I own very little,” Quee Lee said.

Another laugh, briefer this time.

Where did the laugh and voice come from? Somewhere just ahead of her feet, wasn’t it? She risked a careful step forward and then began to kneel.

And the rocks in front of her said, “You are quite wet.”

“I’m sweating, yes.”

“I like to watch your kind perspire.”

“Is that so?”

Silence.

She asked the rocks, “My kind? Humans, you mean.”

“I mean all of the wet lifeforms,” he said. “You sweat. You pant. You allow your cold selves to turn feverish. These are reliable answers to the burdens of excess heat. But I approve of sweating most of all. The exuberance. The unapologetic waste of water. Spending moisture to save the body, if only for a little while.”

Quee Lee finished kneeling.

And the voice moved, arriving from her left. Which was when the slope beside her began to change shape. But slowly, without urgency. Quee Lee kept imagining a patient avalanche, even when she knew better. Even when three enormous fingers and their thumb rose into view, obvious and close . . . even then she was imagining that this slope was collapsing and she was the cause, and oh, she was sorry for that and amazed by her importance. Yes, she was a vast beast, yes.

Then the head showed itself. Gray tear-shaped eyes and no nostrils and a mouth unlike almost every other mouth in the universe. Elaborate and unique, the organ resembled a human beard. A tangle of tightly wound wire-like ropes emerged from the lowest portions of the face, each as thick as Quee Lee’s arm and far, far longer. Some of these ropes ended with razored tips evolved for piercing tough carapaces, while the rest could be described as armored pipettes, answering the eternal need to remove electrified salts from sun-fed solar arrays or out of hapless animals. And during the same feeding, those pipettes would push spent juices back into the victim’s empty places.

Yes, this was the famous mouth of the Grand Many.

But something was wrong. In starlight, Quee Lee could see how too much of the face was exposed. This creature was scarred, and there was no telling when the damage had happened. Perhaps a quarter of its mouth was missing. Yet the behemoth seemed otherwise healthy. And because of that one hand and the broad, almost-human shoulder, he appeared nearly human, or at the very least, this was a statue of a man brought to life by science or a witch's incantation.

The Grand Many were vast, but Quee Lee's companion was larger than any of them. That was her first impression, and it would never change.

"You've come a long way to find me," said the alien.

She couldn't deny it, no.

"So tell me your life story," the stranger insisted.

A single Grand Many was sitting in a hollowed spot on the hillside, and the view before them—the elaborate artwork of light and soft sounds and damp breezes—offered a distant horizon capped with one dome of golden light.

She didn't ask about the light or any other portion of this remarkable view. Instead, she began by offering her true name.

"Which is not the name you carry today," he said.

She had reasons to mislead. "Small, personal reasons," she mentioned.

"I don't want to hear them," the giant warned. "No, share the large portions of your glorious life."

Ripping away thousands of years of existence, Quee Lee offered a relatively honest autobiography.

There was a pause.

Then her companion said, "The Great Surus."

"Is that your name?"

"No," he said. "My species cannot wear names as you know them. Which you understand already, I should think."

"Are you male?"

She wanted to know how to phrase her respect.

"I am male, yes." The giant was close, but his voice was closer. Always a whisper, and always within reaching distance of being soft. "I took the name from human history." Then he said it again, in a very specific way. "Surus."

She repeated the word.

"Do you know the name?"

Quee Lee asked her bioceramic mind for advice, a thousand potential answers dislodged from a long life full of curiosity. Because of cues in the diction, one possibility felt a little more appropriate than the rest.

She began to answer, offering a first word.

And Surus repeated the word. "Elephant," he said. "Yes. To be specific, Surus was Hannibal Barca's favorite war elephant."

"And why take that name?" she asked.

"I was studying your species," he said. "Long before I arrived on the Great Ship, I came across the elephant's story. And somehow his life and his miseries found a home inside me."

"Oh," was the best reaction that she could manage.

Silence came, and then a distant voice crossed the ridge. A human male was calling to someone else. But whoever was shouting fell silent again. Just the two of them were sitting on that slope together, and looking at the golden dome, Quee Lee finally asked, "Did you also walk across the Alps?"

The giant's hand moved, swift and gentle, one finger touching the human shoulder and then gone again. Leaving behind the heat of a giant electrically charged body, and stealing some of her perspiration, too.

“The Alps would be nothing,” said that quiet, sorrowful voice. “You cannot begin to guess the life that I have marched.”

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4

Worlds were built out of names. Even little bland and simple planets wore a thousand designations during their lives. But what if you were a six-billion-year-old marvel of metal and stone, and dry life, and wet life, too? You deserved impressive designations, perhaps too many to count, and at least one of those names should be famous across the galaxy. So familiar and so perfect that when translated into alien music, or pheromones, or a language of swift sculpted light, every strange mind would instantly fill with the image of those shiny onyx giants towering above, motionless beneath the orange-white sun.

Where the Many Stand.

Born as a massive sphere orbiting near its sun, in the water-starved depths of a young solar system, that still nameless body eventually crossed orbits with a hot Jovian, and then it was shoved into cooler regions. Superterrans normally wore deep oceans, but Where the Many Stood was an exception. Its scarce water was buried inside rock and inside salt aquifers, or it was trapped in lakes and little seas near the poles. Multiple lines of life had emerged early, outlasting everything that was less suitable or more unlucky. One watery lineage survived near the southern pole and had barely any role in this story. A very different sort of wet life straddled the north, and it was exceptionally abundant in the highest, wettest zones. Certain intelligent creatures evolved inside that oasis, thriving for so long and in such numbers that the river sediments were full of their bones and beaks and fossilized tusks. They had speech and culture, and in a variety of languages, the region was always known as the Realm of Water.

Several of the world’s largest rivers fed a single high basin that in turn drained to the west, and various tectonic ranges had lifted the outflow channel, thick crust creating an accidental dam. That was why the sea rose higher than it had ever been. Deserts were flooded, the climate chilled, and rain fell in the valleys while a thousand deep harbors waited to be used.

This was an age unlike any other. At least in the memory of the water creatures, these were unparalleled times.

The water creatures were not humans. But translated into the Ship tongue, their species name could be rendered as something rather like “the people.”

The people sported four strong legs made of calcium bone and water-infused muscle, while a third pair of limbs served as powerful arms. Those arms ended with hands born to carry treasure and elaborate tools and their cherished babies, and, when necessary, those hands wielded iron-tipped spears and steel swords, killing their foes with desperate certainty.

The typical human, hearing this description, often imagined a centaur pulled from their own mythology.

Which was the lazy mistake.

Born into the relentless gravity, there was no reward in carrying your head far above the body. No, what passed for the face was set between those long arms—colorful eyes and a durable beak and two pairs of sturdy white tusks meant for display and defense. The typical grown adult had a mass of a thousand kilograms, though healthy males were larger and some were twice that size. By human standards, these were impressive creatures, but of course this was a vast world, and the bottomlands and equator were inhabited by a third, far more magnificent life.

The Mother Sea had never been so generous. A powerful clan would make a nation, and that nation would grow and then spread along the twisting shoreline. Much as water flows, neighbors would mix with neighbors—through blood and through knowledge, and most importantly, through the great contagion: Belief.

The southern coastline was hotter and much sunnier, and one particular people were famous for their seaworthy ships. Winds and oars carried them to every place worth knowing. Even the tiniest fishing village was visited by these traders who made themselves wealthy through cleverness and smart words. And naturally that success gave them enemies, too. But those with power never care about petty hates and far-flung opinions. For those people, success was their solemn right, and because they were building a ten-thousand-year empire, they were entitled to their arrogance and all the pride they could carry, as well as a capital city that should have made every other nation feel small.

That city was famous across the Realm for its fabulous harbor and the broad, well-planned avenues, for the elegant marble buildings and its lovely sculptures honoring the gods, and its cleanliness, and the free, highly literate citizens. But the city was most renowned for the towering wall that surrounded its homes and shops and harbor. The wall was built from a certain alien tree. Salt slabs, they were called. Not an elegant name, or lovely. But honest. Far to the south, straddling the equator, this particular species was nothing but a pernicious weed. But it was a weed that didn't mind cooler air or the occasional rain, which is why it thrived on every side of the Mother Sea.

Like tongues of volcanic glass, the salt slabs grew with one face aimed at dawn, the other at dusk. The slab's flesh was heavier than wood, and like glass, it was untouchable to normal fire. What's more, the city's famous wall was alive. The boundary ground had been dug out by slaves and animals—the trenches five meters deep or deeper—and then those holes were filled with gravel and sand and quite a lot of pure white salt. Only then were the saplings planted—spoiled beauties picked from groves tended out in the desert. Aligned like scales on an armored body, the salt slabs needed almost no water, growing rapidly in the blistering summer air. Thirty and forty and sometimes fifty meters tall, they were fused with their neighbors and topped with ramparts and firing towers, the best iron arrows in the world ready to be driven into anyone foolish enough to attack.

And if the iron didn't repel the invaders, then the citizens had other marvels waiting to be unleashed.

Every world deserved many names, but cities and nations live only a little while, and they can wear just one identity at a time.

"Desert Wind" was a rough, inadequate translation.

"Samoon." That ancient human word did a somewhat better job of capturing the spirit of the place.

The great city of Samoon had already fought and won many wars, but there was only peace now. The worst enemy of the moment was far away and distracted by rebellion. With no nation to battle, the Samoon soldiers drilled infrequently and marched without discipline, and they brawled with one another until their commander finally declared that this was too ugly, too useless.

"Warriors need adventure," he warned his unruly men. And with winter coming, he ordered the worst of his units to gather provisions for a long march. Their destination? The fabled and notorious Lithium Wash.

This leader was an honorable officer. In that spirit, he personally led his soldiers over the coastal mountains and across a sequence of increasingly hostile deserts, marching them past wild salt slabs and glittering pyrite fans as well as clouds of little stony hoppers that lived by stealing juices from the alien foliage.

Fifty days were crossed, and one man out of every five was dead. But the survivors

had learned how to march, and working together, they came to the basin where fabulous treasures were waiting to be found.

Once the sun dropped and all three moons rose, the commander led his army into that furnace, down to a bank of metallic salts constantly shifting under the wind, eroding and recovering and then pulling away again.

Awful as the Lithium Wash was, it was still too cold and wet for the Grand Many. Giants by any measure, they ruled the Realm of Salt. Presumably they had nations and cities, and their own difficult times. But why a pregnant mother would walk so far from home, just to give birth and then hide her newborn inside the salt . . . that was one endless mystery. Perhaps these mothers were making sacrifices to unknown gods. Or they had new husbands who would kill what didn't belong to them. Or maybe they were saving their children from the army or slavery or an enemy's curses.

But of course the Grand Many were aliens, and they weren't killing their babies. Salt and drought were harmless. Once buried in the Wash, the infants fell into hibernations that could last for aeons, perhaps longer. When talking about these spectacular beasts, only one fact was plain and simple: Nothing was known. Except that they were strange beyond all measure, and powerful, and, in the proper circumstances, the Grand Many could be helpful.

Of all the people in the world, the Samoons had the longest, most lucrative relationship with the species.

Heat and metal dusts killed another thousand soldiers. But thirty-nine of the orphans were stolen from what were not graves. Still in hibernation, they were loaded onto wagons and brought back to the city of Samoon, and from that epic beginning, thirty of them broke dormancy, and twenty-four of those Grand Many survived the rigorous training necessary to make them ready for whatever war came next.

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Surus believed that he would never know why he had been buried in the cold damp ground of the north. Every guess offered by his owners was duplicated by his brothers and sisters. They must have been powerful offerings to the stars and moons, or maybe they were being protected from wickedness and revenge. Unless each was cursed in some especially awful fashion: Certain children might deserve to be abandoned in the wilderness. That particular explanation was especially appealing for Surus, implying as it did that a wise mother was capable of looking inside herself, beholding the nature of the soul within.

The twenty-four were tiny when they woke, each no bigger than the watery creatures that saved them and coddled them, and who, when necessary, punished little them with starvation and streams of cold, cold water.

Surus loved the people who saved him from the salt, and he respected those who fed him and taught him useful skills, and he fiercely hated the ones who hurt him badly, even when he deserved to be hurt.

These were the same few people, as it happened.

Wasn't that always the way of loathing and love?

There was a different woman who deserved nothing but his admiration and kind thoughts. She wasn't one of "the water people." Like Surus, she was a Grand Many, but she had served as their obedient slave for several centuries. Stunted compared to the youngsters, partly crippled by some unexplained incident, she could no longer walk without the help of a water-tree fashioned to serve as a crutch, and by now her only duty was to tend the sweet electric groves.

"Sweet electric."

That was a rough translation of her words. The watery people had their language, but the Grand Many had an older, much superior language. The woman didn't know where their words first came from, but those who were long dead had taught them to her—a rich vocabulary joined with a smooth, strong voice moving at the speed of light.

The Grand Many had no need for jaws and lips, or speaking tongues. They spoke with electromagnetic pulses, in the realm that would be called "microwaves" by the unborn, unimagined human animals.

"Our black skin steals the sweet electric from the sun and the hot ground," the old woman explained to the very young Surus. "But when you move, you go hungry. There is more power in a slow stride than all of the electric that we can gather. Which is why the salt-sapped plants exist. What is lazy can hoard. And what is busy, like us, can steal away a fair portion of that juice. Which makes the Many more huge and much more powerful than anything else."

Even as infants, the Grand Many knew how to eat. What weren't nostrils smelled ripe juices at a distance, and those graceful piercing mandibles made graceful little cuts, taking only what was needed and refilling the slab with their own depleted juices. Then in just a season—sooner when the sun was fierce—the slab would ripen again with more of the sweet electric. Which was one kind of evidence that in their native country, in the Realm of Salt, good boys and girls never killed another lifeform.

What would a world without teeth and predators look like? Surely there wouldn't be any fights. Not like the water animals fought. No, the Realm of Salt had to be ruled by peace, profound and eternal. And that peacefulness—their species' indifference to violence and warfare—was why it took years for the people to properly shape Surus, drills and cruelty and more drills finally producing the greatest soldier that ever strode across this land.

The Great Many were spectacular talkers, and the water people chirped in their own furious manner. But communication between the species was not natural, or easy. The trainers had standard verbal commands, while both species gestured with the arms and fingers. Then with more training, the Many mastered a rough little third language built from drawings and symbols, every conversation written into the dirt with branches and fingers and spears.

Even in the middle of the brutal drills, the Grand Many never stopped speaking with the old woman's wondrous language.

In the midst of that life, there was one remarkable, singular night. Dusk brought a mild desert wind that died suddenly. The half-grown Surus was feeding inside the woman's grove. Needing nothing for herself, she rested beside him, motionless in ways that water life would never know. Perfect stillness. No breathing, no digestion. No wastes to expel, and no need to move again for a hundred days, if she wished. Her voice was too quiet for anyone else to hear, and that's when she confessed what Surus always assumed to be true.

"You are my favorite among this crop," she said. "Not my favorite of the others, no. But among your twenty-four, you are the least contemptible."

He didn't have to ask why he was contemptible. Surus was a killer in training, while she was a gentle soul happy to do nothing but help the salt-sapped foliage that kept the good and the wicked alive.

"Tonight's air is special," she mentioned.

The night was hot and clear, the skies exceptionally starry, yes. Was that what she meant?

"No," she said. Then she struck him on the back of his head.

The head was where the Grand Many stowed their brain, which was a stubborn

and sometimes foolish organ. But it was also huge, capable of learning and entitled to moments of true wisdom.

“Leave me,” she said. “Stand now and tell those strong legs to carry you to The Top of the Wind.”

The Top of the Wind was the tallest mountain in this range, and the highest ground for a thousand kilometers in any direction.

“Later,” he said, happy to be suckling at the slab before him.

“No, now,” she said. Then she struck him twice again, with a strength that took the youngster by surprise.

Surus had always been larger than his brothers and sisters. Why that had to be was another mystery, but not worth the bother. And in the same fashion, he was also quicker and stronger than the others, and more than any of the Great Many, he would obey an unexpected order.

It was the middle of the night when Surus reached the mountain peak, but he was already hearing the noises. The voices. Nothing could be recognized, not even single words buried inside an unfamiliar language. But far to the south, somewhere beyond the remote horizon, the Grand Manys were calling out. Places that Surus could not imagine were bright with conversation. Thousands of voices, millions of voices. The Many were gossiping and singing, shouting and celebrating, the culmination of that microwave noise able to reach all the way to a boy’s astonished mind.

The chorus soon faded and then vanished. Perhaps the air shifted, or the multitude had fallen silent. Returning to the grove and the old woman, Surus found her exactly where she had always been, and she spoke first.

“You heard them, did you?”

“Yes.”

He assumed that she had stories to tell, perhaps about other quiet nights and the amazing lessons that she had learned.

But no, these noises were as mysterious to her as they were to Surus. What was important was to tell him, “I know why we were buried in that salt. Buried deep and then abandoned.”

“Do you know?”

“Climate is slower than the weather, but just as fickle,” she said. “There were days when the Mother Sea was smaller, the world was hotter, and our people wandered as far as they could. Which is what every species will do. Our grandmothers were living in the Lithium Wash, and they had fertile daughters, and when the air cooled too much and grew wet, those young daughters left us behind.”

“Because they couldn’t care for us,” Surus assumed.

“No, no.” She laughed in the Grand Many fashion, a sputtering of radio noise that sounded rather like water striking stone. “No, we were left inside the salt because they knew that they would return. Because the warmth always comes again. Because taking an empty land is simple when your best children are waiting for you, sleeping beneath your magnificent feet.”

* * *

In the ways of water, the commander who once led his army into the Lithium Wash had grown old, his body shrinking and drying out before illness killed what remained. Then a massive carriage was built, iron and wood trimmed with the black bark of salt slabs, and clothed in his favorite armor, that little carcass was pulled along by a cadre of young officers. The funeral flowed like water through the famous

streets of Samoon. Hundreds of thousands of citizens and slaves lined the route, watching the hero pass and then marveling at the Grand Many who were marching behind the wagon. Those towering giants were lined up one after the next, and not just Surus and his siblings had the honor. More than eighty of the Many had been gathered from across the nation, most worn down by work or war, but each dressed in garb that looked splendid to their proud owners. Except of course the water had tiny weak eyes, and these people could see only a portion of the magical colors that made the morning lovely, as every morning should be.

A certain young man walked alone at the front of the procession. This was the greatest of duties, a station of unparalleled honor, yet Surus didn't recognize this individual, and he was unusually adept at picking out the identifying details in these little beasts. Later, one of the trainers would scratch the story of this fellow into the dirt. Anibas was his name. The dead man's grandson and already a celebrated warrior, he had put down rebellions in far places, proving himself to be a gifted commander. Even the boy's name was noble. Anibas meant "Gift of God," and a multitude of signs had promised that greatness was coming to him and to everyone standing in his shadow.

"Anibas," the gathering masses had called out. "Lead us to victory, Anibas!"

The Cemetery of Heroes was outside the city's living walls, covering the high ground surrounding the Founders' Tomb. Every free person was buried there, the graves marked with blocks and slabs of polished stone and tiny etched words always pointed at the Mother Sea. Anibas walked through the Gates of Dawn, and the funeral wagon followed, and then one after another, the Grand Many bent low and crawled through, then rose tall and walked again, keeping loyal to the order given to them from the start.

Surus walked first among the Many, almost certainly because he was the largest, most spectacular specimen.

Once the procession was beyond streets and teeming bodies, the new commander stopped and then turned around, and shattering every custom, he strode past his grandfather's body and then gestured at the giant before him, one arm giving a command.

Surus obeyed.

Anibas stepped onto the shiny warm palm of a hand not unlike the hands of people, and with grace and no scent of fear, the new commander rode that hand up to the giant's left shoulder. The rest of the journey was made with the commander balancing on four legs. What if he fell? Or what if this enormous creature turned on him? Either fate would have proved fatal, and history would have been changed. But of course neither disaster happened, and because history was a flood, another channel was cut deep and became real.

And Surus?

He felt helpless, and he felt honored.

How remarkable it was, being property, being someone's slave, yet feeling wondrously special, too. Though of course that was why there had always been slaves, and why the ancient institution worked so well.

* * *

For the people of Samoon, war arrived as words and a sense of purpose delivered by a few exhausted messengers. But for the Grand Many, the war came with nearly constant drills and many more chances to feed. Every trainer grew more cruel or more kind, depending on his nature. From the foothills behind Samoon, Surus watched the fleets row free of the harbor, and then broad linen sails carried them out onto the Mother Sea, beyond the sight of this land and perhaps beyond every land. Floating armies were battling beyond the horizon, employing rams and fire and iron bolts, and most importantly, the whims of the gods. Then those familiar vessels came

home again, or they didn't return, and as loot, the fleet brought captured vessels that weren't as lovely or strong as theirs.

"As ours," the Many would tell one another, with pride.

What remained of the enemy's fleets was unimpressive, and with sharp eyes, the Many found plentiful signs that the war was going badly for these hated, nearly invisible people.

Like Samoon, the enemy nation took its name from a special wind.

Call them the Mistrals.

Early in the war, Anibas marched his army far to the west. But not to fight the Mistrals, no. For two years, in places Surus would never know by name, the young commander battled little nations and tribes, building an empire of his own. Then he returned with nothing but his honor guard, and a third year and too much of the fourth was spent making careful preparations.

Anibas' plans weren't shared with the Grand Many, and they didn't expect to be told anything. But superior new body armor was built for each of them, bronze carefully shaped for the owner's torso and head, and, most importantly, sheets of woven steel were pieced together to cover their massive legs and ankles. The familiar antique weapons wielded in drills were taken away, melted down and recast, and for twenty days, teams of artisans polished and sharpened the most deadly weapons ever seen. And when winter came, grove after grove of the salt slabs was drained of its sweet electrics, the salty juice sealed inside wooden casks that were stacked inside warehouses within the city walls.

That third year had brought warnings. Citizens walked worried and smelled of tension, and their voices were sad; words about loss mixed with prayers for the living. The glorious fleets had been refitted, hundreds of warships vanishing over the horizon again, but fewer returned, and the rare captured Mistral ship proved larger and far better built than before. Perhaps superior even to the Samoon vessels.

Obviously the capital would soon be under siege. The Many talked endlessly about these matters, and nothing else seemed probable. Masses of armored men were about to invade, bringing weapons and discipline and fear, and the greatest strength of all, that mistaken idea that the gods approved only of them. One morning, perhaps tomorrow, a foreign army was going to stand on the plains outside the living black wall, and the twenty-four Many would emerge into the sun, accompanied by Anibas and his honor guard and the city's militia too, and there would be a battle that two species would celebrate for ten thousand years.

Except these Many weren't going to defend the capital. During the spring of that fourth year, the rest of the Grand Many were brought from all corners of the empire, armored and armed for duty. Even the crippled old woman who didn't believe in killing was given a crutch bristling with spikes and slicing blades. Meanwhile, Anibas ordered an entire mountainside of watery trees cut down to stumps, green wood reshaped and pieced together to build huge sledges. One hundred sledges were completed, their runners slickened with salt slab bark, and then the largest water animals in the world—the fabled walking hills—were bolted into the traces, each ready to pull its load until it was dead.

Twenty-four sledges were meant to carry the Many, while the other sledges were loaded with the new armor and long swords and other tools of combat, plus many hundreds of casks filled with the sweet electric.

It was already summer when Anibas set out with his new army. A schedule was in place, but unspecified troubles had made them late. Surus' single duty was to ride, drinking sunshine and spending no extra energy until there was some clear need. In bad terrain, he sometimes had to offer a kick, sometimes a tug, and where rough mountains pushed near the sea, he would stand again, walking the next kilometers

on his own. But those casks and stored feasts were never touched. Which seemed reasonable, since summer meant short shadows and the hot coastline rich with salt-sapped forests, and there were plenty of opportunities to consume everything that resting bodies needed to thrive. Except why slow yourselves by carrying this extra weight? Riding the sledges, free of the demands of mouth and breath, the Many had nothing to do but speak to one another, trying to predict what the great Anibas intended for them, and naturally, which one of them would win the highest honors.

The Mother Sea ended abruptly. A chain of young mountains rose before them, and a salty river ran between twin granite peaks, all of the world's water roaring through that enormous gap.

Boats were waiting to transport the luggage, plus twenty-four enormous rafts built according to Anibas' orders. Each raft was massive but buoyant, not as stable as the land but nearly so, and each was carpeted with dirt and small stones, creating the illusion of real ground. Perhaps that was to mollify the Many, although it wasn't necessary. The churning water had to be crossed, and no trick of perception made this easier. What brought confidence was the fact that Samoons were first-rate engineers, and the Many were prized possessions, and what was prized was never carelessly thrown away.

The original walking hills were killed for meat and out of convenience. More walking hills were waiting inside giant stables, and now they were led out and chained to the rafts and then beaten until they understood their only purpose. And likewise, the Many knew where to step and how to lower themselves, those massive, iron-boned bodies as low and as near the middle as possible.

They crossed where the water was widest and slowest.

Unfortunately, one raft broke its lines. Desperate attempts were made to recover it, but the current was too strong. Then the Many riding that raft was ordered to step off and risk the water. But he was a small fellow named Kik, fearful by nature, and a little simple, too. He couldn't obey his owners' commands, and he was equally unable to obey common sense. Which was why Surus, watching from his raft, saw his dear brother vanish into the afternoon glare and the spray.

Agas would pass before Surus learned what happened to that poor silly boy. And in reflection, he realized that this spectacular death had been a blessing.

In contrast, Surus' little voyage enjoyed a different ending.

In sight of the far shoreline, his walking hill decided to die, causing small and large panics among the people and the other Many. How would their finest warrior survive this conundrum? On foot, naturally. And with that, the giant forced himself to slide into cold water. What couldn't be confused for toes found the rocky bottom, and with the body as erect as possible, and with foam and driftwood swirling around what passed for his waist, the giant began to walk.

The audience on the shoreline broke into two kinds of cheers.

Of course the water was cold and unpleasant. But in truth, the feel of it was never half as horrible as he would pretend to his owners. So not only did Surus walk the rest of his way to the new world, but he also took the trouble of grabbing the animal that had proved unworthy, dragging its carcass up to a long beach that was as doomed as Kik and as the other twenty-two.

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Beyond the beach, standing beside the next serviceable harbor, was a freshly built city, and outside the city, a great army was bivouacked. Many of the soldiers hailed

from Samoon lands, but others wore foreign uniforms or no uniform at all. The half-sensible noise of home was replaced with a dozen messy collections of shouts and peculiar words that not even other people understood well enough. But the giant of giants, the Great Surus, had brought this menagerie a rich carcass—meat to carve apart and cook in fires and then eat in that ridiculous fashion of theirs.

Another full day was spent pulling down tents and loading necessities onto smaller beasts, and as the army pushed north into a chill wind, thousands more emerged from the surrounding countryside. Not soldiers, but loyal slaves who were people and females who were young and wives to the officers, and the occasional child, too. This river of wet flesh was beginning a hard race against seasons and the gathering cold. Strange landscapes needed to be crossed.

North they went, and sometimes east, every day bringing challenges as simple as little rivers, and as important as angry tribes that had to be soothed. The Samoons were known here and often mistrusted, but watching his owners, and in particular studying Anibas' meetings with important strangers, Surus began to sense that their enemies, the distant Mistrals, were more despised and perhaps not quite so feared.

When clouds came, bringing rain, the Grand Many dressed in waterproof tents stitched together for their protection, and they rode on the sledges until too many of the walking hills had died. Which was foreseen. From that point they were expected to walk for themselves, dragging sledges and their own food. A few casks were emptied of their sweet electrics, but they were commanded to preserve the rest of the stocks for later. "Later" was a nameless place and some distant day. "Later" was vast and too awful for words, and they marched despite hunger. The saving grace was the little glades of salt-sapped foliage clinging to the high, south-facing terrain, and the Many drained all of them to death. Hills and more rivers had to be crossed, and walled villages delayed the army. But these weren't serious fights, and no one demanded help from the Many. What Surus and the twenty-two did best was break the trail through wilderness forests, scouting a landscape hardly known to the multitude who could barely keep pace with them.

Sixty-two days later, the world creased its skin—a single enormous ridge of stone and stunted water trees, and near the sky, one misplaced grove of salt slabs that didn't seem to mind the frigid, impoverished air.

The Many couldn't be stopped. Dropping their sledges, they raced one another to the summit, to the fresh feeding. With the longest gait, Surus was close to the lead, but a little sister named Waver beat him to the honor. But Waver wasn't suckling when he arrived. No, she was standing tall in the gale, eyes gazing into the remote distance.

Surus expected another ridge and more feeding.

And in a sense, he was prescient.

But the second ridge and a towering final ridge were quickly forgotten. From that wind-washed vantage point, with nothing but thin, desiccated air between here and the horizon, Surus' eyes made out the whiteness of things that were not clouds, and a jagged sharpness like the blade of a badly abused sword, and there was the sense of looking past the sky, into the realm of moons and stars and the fiery halls where the best gods held sway over every little mortal who insulted Fate simply by daring to exist.

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Climbing, the Many spoke to one another with urgent voices that the people would never hear. Using that swift, ethereal language, every possible action was mentioned, and every plan was embraced, at least for a moment or two. Climb these mountains? Of course they would. Their masters wanted nothing else, and it was their honor to serve, and because they were the Great Many, having no freedom for

themselves, they were free of the burdens of choice and doubt. Yet it was equally apparent that they could turn around whenever they wanted and walk home again. Who would stop them? Anibas was starving for a fight, and his army wanted glory and loot. They wouldn't waste time chasing twenty-three escaped slaves. So yes, they could circle back in the night and hurry south again, with casks and wild salt slabs to feed them. They would eventually find their way across the Mother Sea. And what would happen after that? Plainly, without their giant warriors, this army would be doomed. Anibas would surely die. Which meant that the Many could go home again, using spears and dirt to tell any story they wished, and the grateful city would let them live warm and well-fed, making ready to fight when the victorious enemies came.

But that enormous cowardice pointed in a different, much bolder direction. Turn now and march south, crossing the Mother Sea and standing again on the Old World. But never walk east. Instead of following what they knew, the Many would journey across mountains and broad deserts, eventually finding their way to the fabled Realm of Salt.

The twenty-three were still climbing the foothills when a brother named Makeshift suggested that exact action, and falling in love with his idea, he refused to be dissuaded by reason or fear.

Votes were taken. Surus expected no one to support this unlikely plan, yet eleven of them did, and three others refused to vote.

Among the Many, every voice had to agree before changes were embraced. After another day was spent dragging sledges, slowly picking their way up the cold, rain-soaked rock, more votes were taken, and now fifteen of the Many were convinced by this act of dishonor, and five more held back their precious votes.

Surus saw no choice but to take action.

First, he picked up a boulder with one hand, striking Makeshift on the back of his skull, causing him to fall into a barren little valley, cursing all the way. Then with his loudest voice, he told everyone, "This is what we must do. Climb. Cross what has never been crossed and see country that the Many have never seen before. Then with Anibas at our side, we will destroy our enemies and take our loot, earning the thanks of these little people. And then? They will have no choice but to build us giant rafts to carry us home again. Because we are great warriors, and we will be heroes, and for ten thousand years, the people and the Many will speak about the wonders that wear nothing but our great names."

Surus never mentioned to his audience how he once stood on The Top of the Wind, or how millions of voices had reached him from the Realm of Salt.

Nor did he confess his affections for the owners who demanded so much.

Better to give the dreamers the largest possible dream, and that's why the Grand Many voted again and decided on his way. Then the climb continued. The Realm of Water was abandoned for the Realm of Ice. The cold made them sluggish, but Anibas and his army suffered worse, gasping for every breath, and that was when Surus ordered the Many to push the pace. Alone, the twenty-three came through the Pass of Wailing Stones, and after more days of suffering and terror, they drained the last of the casks and abandoned every sledge but the few that carried armor and weapons, and that was how they invaded the Mistrals' lands.

Regardless how history would be sung or written, that was the truth.

Many days later, Anibas staggered out of the mountains to find his Many sitting tall on a south-facing slope, winter sun on their flesh and a lazy river at their feet, and behind them, a grove of salt-sapped trees sucked to husks.

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The impossible had happened. Confounding every expectation, exceeding every lucid fear, a foreign enemy had attacked the Mistral's homeland. How could the tallest mountains in the world be breached? Yet that was what had happened. And when spring arrived, the northern frontier was being terrorized by marauding patrols and fire and one quick-marching army carrying steel and fifty thousand hungry bellies.

And the treacherous Samoos had brought their giants, too.

Understanding the enemy, Anibas ordered his Many to patrol in broad circles, smashing villages and burning fields, but always allowing a few survivors to run away.

"Fear," their commander scratched into the foreign dirt. "Fear in the mind, fear in the air, fear riding the wind."

In drills, Surus had killed nothing but animals, and nothing in his training or imagination had envisioned this kind of murder. So many, so easily. Unarmed farmers, and militias barely equipped. Resplendent in his armor, Surus kicked hovels to pieces and chopped apart the slowest bodies, and then to make himself even more fearsome, he would clang his favorite sword against his largest shield, that bell-like song chasing the panicked little people down the muddy roads.

Late spring brought wonderful heat, and whenever one of the Many found a ripe grove of salt slabs, he or she would call to the others, offering shares of their feast.

The largest female among the twenty-three was named Forever—a strong, smart creature who relished this brutal carnage. One day, Forever found a rich grove, but only Surus was nearby and hungry. Squatting on the long hill, he drained tree after tree while the two of them spoke about what they had seen today and their guesses for tomorrow and the rest of the year. But then Forever fell silent. Surus looked at her standing on the highest ground, and he immediately fell into thoughts about love and how it was a shame that she felt like a sister to him and was she his true sister? There was no way to be certain about their familial relationship. And even if they were unrelated, the prospects of a successful mating . . . well, it had happened in the past. The people and the oldest Many told stories about babies made and born, and some of those children had survived, though stunted and quite stupid. Perhaps that was because they were standing so far from their proper homelands. Maybe endless sun and blazing heat were necessary for babies, or maybe some essential food was missing. But if they ever had the power to mate, Surus and Forever both understood that they were meant for one another, and their child would have no choice but to be remarkable.

Those were his thoughts when Forever said, "They are coming."

"Who comes?"

"The Mistral's and their steel."

"You see them?"

"Their dust, yes. And I hear little feet and their talk, and come join me here. What do you find in this wind?"

A multitude of farts carried on the northbound breeze.

They returned to Anibas and wrote their news in the dirt, with a language that was growing more complex by the day.

Learning the news, their commander danced before them with excitement, and then he gave orders to his officers. The various units were scattered behind the surrounding hills. Eventually a few lightly armed enemy scouts came close, but they were ambushed, and that was why eighty thousand Mistral's were kept blind. Determined to come fast and end this appalling invasion, that young army walked as a body into an open valley, and by nightfall, almost every last one of them was dead.

Anibas, being wise, refused to let any good soldier escape to fight again.

* * *

Three more Mistralian armies were raised that year, raw recruits mixed with experienced old men, and one after the next, they were sent north.

The first army came over a ridge to find half of the Samoons in disarray, and they immediately attacked those ragged, pathetic lines. But that was a trap, and they were slaughtered with few losses.

The next army was smaller and even less cautious. Late one day, their commander spotted the twenty-three feeding in a large salt slab grove. Only a few thousand Samoon soldiers accompanied the Many, and that was why the Mistrals attacked at night, overwhelming what they believed was a vulnerable campsite. But darkness didn't exist to the Many eyes. Kneeling on the adjacent hill, Surus saw warm drops of water wandering about in confusion, and he heard anger and stubborn threads of bravery. Then the Many charged out of blackness, gaits matched, shields smashing against swords, triggering a retreat where half of the dead were trampled and maimed by their own kind.

The final army proved the largest and luckiest, and it was guided by the first traces of caution. This was autumn, and the enemy's central mission was to shadow. Not to engage, but to watch and torment, avoiding any battle on any field that gave the invaders the advantage. Samoons preferred to be half-armored and quick, while the Mistrals believed in strapping long blades to your tusks, broad interlocking shields in one hand, officers shouting blunt orders to men who had been drilled to depend on one another and nothing else. They wanted to fight on broken country. They dreamed of standing high on some rugged slope, their good backs secure and their steel facing the Many. But their commander and his officers were fixated on avoiding annihilation until winter camps could be built, stockades and bunkers protecting their supplies, giving them so many more chances to drill.

But wise gods and fickle gods decided to give the Samoons a rare opportunity. Not only did Anibas call his subordinates to a meeting, but for the first time, he ordered the Great Surus to sit on the ground behind them. The Samoon army had spent days marching ahead of those cautious armored columns, but now the weather had changed, bringing heavy fog and blindness to the people. Digging words into the mud and waving his free arm, Anibas perfectly described the future. Their enemies would follow tracks that were three days old, marching upon a wide road, and that road would soon carry them between a large lake and steep hills. Pulled into a line, sick of marching and hungry for permanent beds, the Mistrals would continue chasing what they couldn't catch, and they would never look up into the rough hills beside them. Because the Samoons didn't like hills, did they? No, their enemies were on the plains ahead of them, unreachable, and that's why the pursuing army would feel invincible.

"Surus sees through the fog," Anibas said to his officers.

The Grand Many saw every color of light, and heat was another light, and working blood made a soft lovely glow. With his own iron bolt, Surus wrote in the mud. "Agreed," he swore, and then he wiped the mud smooth again.

"You are my eyes," Anibas told him.

The symbol for "Question" seemed necessary.

"You will know," this great person wrote. "When the enemy is beneath our hiding places, when his front ranks are trapped and his trailing ranks are trapped, you will know it and say so this way." Then he made the motion of sword and shield driving hard against each other three times. "That is when we attack."

The future was known, and the slaughter proved wondrous. Only four hundred

and twenty-three good people were killed, and ninety-two thousand fighters were removed from the world, and ordering that charge was an honor that belonged entirely to Surus.

But there was sorrow, too. In the confusion, two of the Many wandered into the soft muds of that lake, and losing their balance and poise, they toppled over, allowing soldiers to crawl over their prone bodies, iron hammers used to drive pikes into brains that were nothing like the brains of people, until they were dead.

* * *

Winter came, and the twenty-one sat together, often for days at a time. When there was rain, tents were erected over them, and when the sun returned, their bodies were given light and slaves brought casks of stored electrics, and sometimes fresh food was drained from distant, starving salt slabs.

That winter was the first time that the enemy began to kill the Many's food. A nation that could summon army after army could easily find enough hands for that grueling work. For hundreds of kilometers on all sides, groves were uprooted and the trees were carried south, and the Many could do little but sit out of the rain or sip at the low weak teasing sun, speaking to one another until it was decided that speech was useless, not one respectable thought left to share.

Spring arrived with strong rains, but good wise Anibas, knowing what was important, sent his best units back and forth across the countryside, recovering every drop of the sweet electric and every living sapling. Here was enough sustenance to feed his Many for one hundred days, perhaps longer. And with that treasure in tow, he marched his army south to destroy what remained of the enemy, and then this new empire would honor every hero, living and dead.

The winter camp was abandoned.

Twenty-one Many walked together, stealing the lead. No one, not even Anibas, tried to dissuade them.

Five days and bright skies brought happiness, and a southern wind gave hopes for a hundred more days that were this good. But then a high hill and an eastern wind brought a stink like none other.

Surus sent quick little Waver back to Anibas with news.

Then he and the other nineteen knelt together, listening to the rumbling roar of a multitude.

Where did these endless soldiers come from?

Saying nothing, Surus rose and then broke into a shuffling gait. None of the others followed. Alone, he chased farts and voices and clashing armor, scaling the next three hills before he knelt low, crawling up the final ridge. But there was no way to hide a body like his, and why bother? He wanted to know what was coming. So the giant among giants stood again, appearing suddenly before the army that was stretched out below him. One hundred and fifty thousand warriors were in motion, and the sight of this two-legged champion generated cries and confusion and flights of arrows that couldn't reach halfway up the slope.

The Great Surus swung his shield in the air, repeating the motion used by Anibas when he was demanding silence.

Oddly, the enemy army granted him that.

Then Surus turned, showing them his back, and as slowly as he had ever walked in his life, he vanished from their narrow view.

Many days later, after long marches and night marches and little bites of rest and dream, those two armies fought the greatest battle in history. Outnumbered nearly four-to-one, Anibas had to rely on genius and speed and disciplined troops who obeyed every order, and just as importantly, soldiers who would do nothing foolish when orders didn't arrive. And there were the Many, too. How much was dictated by their owners and how

much was their own initiative would never be known. But on that great day, a never-used trick from youth was brought out. The bronze and steel armor built just for them was stripped away, replaced with thick layers of plant fibers and animal fur bound together with rope, and those new clothes were soaked with fats and pure alcohols. Then in the midst of battle, when flying dust and screams made every wet eye blind, the Many charged the enemy from behind—twenty-one giants running in a line, each carrying nothing but flint and sharpened knives barely four meters long.

Flint against steel engendered sparks, and in the same moment, they set themselves on fire.

And Surus discovered a happiness that he had never imagined. Wrapped snug inside that fierce blaze, he realized that this was life in the Realm of Salt. This was true heat, and this was his natural state, and he intended to live this way every day, once he finally found his way home.

* * *

9

An empire was born that day, but not the empire imagined by the victors.

More than one hundred thousand enemies were dead. But the Samoons had suffered five thousand killed or crippled, and three more of the Many were lost. And most importantly, the victors were exhausted. Advancing to the south was impossible as fact or even as an idea. The enemy armor and swords and tusk-razors formed impressive, useless hills, and eviscerated flesh made a horrible stink, and since this place had no clean drinking water for the water life, fevers came to soldiers, killing another three thousand before it was spent.

Twenty days passed before the victorious army was able to march. A few of the Many pushed south, scouting the countryside, and every evening, when the air was clear and their voices carried, that vanguard would stand on hilltops and call back to Surus, first with complaints about loneliness, and then telling him exactly what they had seen and heard.

No new army was approaching, which meant there were no more soldiers to fight, or the Mistrals were hiding their reserves. Either way, this was happy news next to every other report. Not one farm field had been planted for this year, and the livestock were removed, peasants and slaves missing, every village standing empty and sometimes burned down. And worst of all were the south-facing ridges. Each was stripped of salt slabs and every edible weed, shovels and careful hands removing all the sustenance, and that careful withering destruction seemed to point at the Mistral's fabled capital: The City of Promises.

Every evening, Surus would absorb those grim reports, and then he would walk off his hill, finding Anibas waiting beside his tent, sitting on his haunches. The man had strong tusks and a large beak, and fur that was the color of that soft metal that was good for nothing but jewelry. Moonlight and stars illuminated their etched words and the quick, nearly unconscious gestures. The commander always asked Surus questions, hunting for hope as well as useful details. His most-trusted Many soon learned how to phrase his responses, coaxing the conversation to last longer than necessary. The officers always stood nearby, watching without entirely understanding, waiting for Anibas to give them orders or send them to bed without instructions. And all that while, the Many still living in camp didn't bother to attend the meeting, relying entirely on Surus' account of events.

The mightiest army in the world was being led by two considerable minds who every night, in small, vital ways, grew more familiar with one another.

But only one genius had a firm grasp on everything that was said.

* * *

It was the middle of summer when the Samoons finally arrived at the city walls.

Every Mistral boast had promised wealth and a marvel of engineering, but neither was apparent to the invaders. The City of Promises was encircled by dead stone, cubic blocks piled together, crude and thick and unlovely. Yet the wall was impressively tall. Not even Surus could see over the ramparts. But there was an easy solution. The Many laid down beside one another and on top of one another, building a living staircase. Then before Surus started to climb, he beckoned, and Anibas climbed onto his palm and settled on a shoulder, and Surus balanced on Waver's back. Together, the two of them studied the ramparts manned with hundreds of soldiers and impressively large catapults, and beyond the walls were wooden buildings and narrow twisting streets and the sounds of civilians busily living their ordinary lives.

Anibas made his demands known to the city, first by shouts, and later, emissaries standing below the main gate.

Eventually a small gate opened and out came slaves with two duties: First, to tell the invaders that there was no surrender. And then to form a circle, each one of them goring his neighbor, leaving all of them certain of death.

The war of relentless motion had been won, and that meant nothing. The siege was only days old, and prospects were miserable. Occasional couriers brought news of the battles being won in far places, but not on the Mother Sea, and there was no means to carry reinforcements from the homelands. Treasure and old grudges might win recruits from the local populations, yes, but these towns and little cities were either empty or uncooperative to the point of battle. Plus this army of stomachs was already hungry, and after being consumed faster than planned, the sweet electrics were being rationed. This famine would turn critical long before winter. And no siege could succeed if the City couldn't be surrounded completely, which wasn't possible with their depleted numbers and the endless demands for food.

That tall and ugly wall had to be breached, and they didn't have the luxury of delay. The finest officers met with Anibas. Surus was not invited. Wonderful siege machines had been drawn on parchment, but none were easy to build as fact. Various battle plans were offered, weighed, and then discarded for good reasons. Finally the officers made their views known, and having no choice, Anibas came to visit Surus and all of the Many.

"Mutiny" was a symbol never written before.

What did this word in the dirt mean?

An entire morning was spent wrestling with the politics of water life. And meanwhile, the officers and the toughest remaining soldiers gathered on the hillside, waiting for a command from Anibas, or clear evidence that the Many were rebelling, or best of all, one true clear compelling sign from the gods.

In another two years, knowing this one tiny man even better, Surus would appreciate just how frightened he was then. To lose his Many. To lose his army. To lose life and the final battle and his unbroken legend as a master of every contest. Each was at stake, and like every tiny drop of wet life, Anibas wasn't certain what to do next, or even which of those treasures was most precious to him.

Then the sun was high, and the tiny man cut more words into the ground, Surus translating where necessary while the eighteen discussed this very simple, very desperate plan.

"Breach the walls at any cost."

That was how Surus described their part of the attack.

Little Waver wanted to obey.

Her sister, the enormous Forever, prophesied that the enemy's iron bolts would kill

half of them before one stone was moved.

Waver claimed not to care.

Then Makeshift spoke bluntly. "We kill this one little drip of blood."

Anibas, he meant.

"And when the water flows downhill at us, we kill the rest of them," he said, his voice bold, even when the words were impossible.

The Many continued to discuss options and pitfalls, and meanwhile Anibas warily retreated to his difficult, half-starved soldiers. Night soon took the world, and nobody was certain what would happen tomorrow. Who would kill whom, and who else would die because of these blunders? But then the gods, seeing an opportunity for mayhem and other fun, let the winds shift, and the hungry Many began to smell sweet electrics. That astonishing odor was riding over the ugly wall, hinting at storehouses filled with feasts, and the eighteen of them stood together now, under the dry rain of starlight and those soft cold radio colors that never stopped falling out of the darkness, every eye studying a barrier that suddenly could not have appeared any shorter and weaker.

Hardly an obstacle at all, and why had they worried so much?

* * *

10

Aeons later, speaking to a single drip of thinking blood, that war's final survivor would carefully describe how he and his brothers and his sisters had successfully defeated the main gate. A giant tree trunk with a boulder lashed to one end served as the battering ram, shields and lumber carried as a roof and offering just enough protection from the iron bolts. There was pride in the voice, although that might have been a failure involving the translator. Even excellent AIs were capable of portraying vanities that didn't exist. Pride or not, the gate was shattered, and the City of Promise was exposed, and Surus offered the words, "Before us, wooden homes and tiny stone streets," and then the voice ceased.

Silence took hold, and it stretched past any human pause.

The thinking blood respectfully said nothing. She might have remained mute for the rest of the night. But the translator was sufficiently irritated by this nothingness, and that was why the AI said to both creatures, "This is not normal. He is never so quiet as this."

More time was spent, and more patience.

Then Surus was speaking again.

"Wooden homes and tiny streets," he repeated. "But no citizens. No militia, and no Mistral army. Nothing but the difficult terrain to block our passage."

Following the smell of food, the Grand Many battered their way through a freshly abandoned district. Anibas was behind them, but marching fast, brave as always, leading his army toward the shattered gate. Except there were soldiers left on the ramparts, and they delayed the Samoons for a little while. Which was the enemy's grave mistake. Or the people hiding inside the abandoned houses and shops made the blunder. Either way, the fires were set too soon, and there were too many sparks or too much stored fuel, and the smoke and music of combustion was why the Samoons turned into cowards while the eighteen marched straight ahead.

For them, wildfire was nothing until it caught them, and then it was a pleasant nuisance, and once it swept ahead, fire was a blessing. The district was burnt to ashes, and they soon reached a lower, much older wall—a boundary from an age when the City wore another name, perhaps.

The prevailing wind kept promising feasts, luring them over the barrier, into a district of temples and statues and empty government buildings, plus one impressive amphitheater where contests of skill and daring were performed for the masses.

That sweet electric stink was coming from inside the stone bowl.

Of course caution was considered. The Many debated the merits of every tactic but the one they took. Except there was no choice. They shuffled through an enormous gate, onto a plain of foot-packed dirt and animal bones. The sweet electric was above them, on all sides of them, and hidden by the delicious odor were the heavily armored soldiers. Perhaps ten thousand of them. Though likely quite a few more. These were survivors of the earlier losses, much wiser about the Grand Many, and shouting together, as one, they flooded onto a patch of ground where eighteen giants stood in a circle, shoulder to shoulder to shoulder, not one of them believing for a moment that this would become anything but their total victory.

* * *

Again, a pause.

Perhaps not as long as the last pause, or the audience was better prepared for silence.

Then Surus was speaking again, but not where he had left off. A year was suddenly bridged, the war older but still vigorous, and every battle was being won by the Samoons and their two extraordinary commanders.

“Anibas depended on me,” he said, the pride authentic or otherwise. “I saw what he saw, but I also saw farther and heard more, and the wind brought important scents to my face, and darkness meant nothing to me, and I could stand on a hilltop without moving, for ten days without moving, and then a careless voice would wander up a little valley, and I would turn just enough and listen with all of my body, counting the enemies who were trying to sneak up on what remained, even then, the finest army to march on that wondrous world.”

Queen Lee was weeping again. She hadn't bothered to count tears or decipher what triggered each of these crying jags. But kneeling exactly where she kneeled at the beginning, she was thoroughly exhausted. Legs that hadn't moved felt as if they had conquered mountains and waded rivers, and it was exhausting work, stomping the life out of thousands of wet little bodies, each of those bodies a dozen times larger than her.

She felt enormous and wickedly tired, ready to finish this endless struggle but not one clue about how to achieve that precious goal.

“I knew the enemy so well,” said Surus.

Like him, Queen Lee appreciated how the Mistrals thought, and more importantly, how they would never think. Surrender was not a consideration. Not for sane minds, and probably not for the mad ones either. To the Mistrals, defeat could be inflicted only on your enemies, and should they run out of soldiers, the Mistrals were prepared to arm every civilian. They would make mothers wear poisoned razors on their tusks, and children would carry wooden spikes into combat, while babies and disloyal slaves would be murdered . . . always better than giving your foe fresh meat to use against you.

“And I had never known any other creature as well as I knew him,” Surus began.

And paused.

Then, “As I knew Anibas.”

The other seventeen Many were lost inside the City of Promise. “Lost” meant killed while the Great Surus was watching, or he saw them knocked from their feet and covered with ropes, fierce soldiers descending with steel spikes and iron mallets. How Surus survived the ambush was a mystery to him and would always be. Orders were given to retreat. He would never forget shouting that reasonable command, his voice making the stars shiver. But then he ignored his own wise orders, wading back

into that mass of bodies and the slippery gore.

Little Waver slipped in the blood and fell.

That was a tale that he would draw into the dirt and mud, and after a year of practice, Surus was able to capture not just the events but his own sense of boundless shame.

Because Anibas was a genius for understanding others, the man knew precisely what to tell his colleague. His good friend. The man spoke about old wars and the battles he had known. With words more than dirt, he described how the mind narrowed in times of strife, nothing noticed but the soldier's next step and the next slash of the sword. Pain was never seen. Not until later. And fear, important as it was, was everywhere and shared by all and no mighty warrior and no sniveling coward was ever able to describe his terror. That was why tiny moments were fixed in the mind. Anibas, the greatest warrior, was kneeling beside the Great Surus, and with a hand, he gave the gesture that in so many species was meant to bring reassurance, calming the aches and the frights that flowed into the emptiness left behind by every war.

The City of Promise had been invaded and half-burned and then abandoned again, and a year later, the Samoon army was roaming freely to the south. Despite every disaster, there was reason for hope. The Mistrals sent only little armies that fled with the first clash of arms. A few towns had given young men to the cause, and they were gradually becoming less-awful soldiers. Also, several thousand new soldiers had been ferried from the homeland, bringing promises of another thirty Grand Many being trained to replace the losses—new children brought from the Lithium Wash as well as other, more distant wastelands.

That winter ended on high ground protected by stockades, with food enough for the people and for the Grand One who sat astride the mountaintop, never moving but always watching for dangers.

The next year was much like the last.

And the third year was as well.

Yet the Samoos kept moving farther south, away from the capital that was being rebuilt despite war and death. A city that was renamed Vengeance, and when he heard that name, Surus finally said to his only close friend, "We will never win."

Anabis agreed, but what else could be done? Ideas were loyal or they were fickle, and holding out for more reinforcements and more Many seemed to be the only idea that was loyal to them.

Then another year arrived, and the steady slow but endless loss of soldiers—to disease, to accident, to murder in the ranks, to the trap of age—made for a smaller army capable of holding nothing but one fat finger of land that was sticking far out into the Mother Sea. And that was when the Mistrals' greatest army appeared on the horizon. One hundred thousand well-drilled, well-led soldiers, they were wearing the finest armor, marching in perfect formation. This was a river of bodies that couldn't be outmaneuvered on such narrow ground. The Samoos could see that there was no hope. And then, when nothing worse was thinkable, out from that nightmare strode three more figures.

"Waver," said Surus.

Then he said, "Makeshift."

And after a brief silence, he added, "Forever."

Three of the Many had survived the ambush inside the City of Promise. And after years of healing and coaxing by their captors, and after endless talk about what was possible and who to blame, they had dressed themselves in the glorious red battle armor of the other side. They were the Grand Many, and Surus stared across the plain at his lost friends.

Then he bent over, his face close to Anibas' face.

The man's breath smelled nervous.

But with two fingers, one from each titanic hand, the Great Surus began to write in the dust.

"We will lose," he wrote.

"But not today."

Then the two of them worked as one, and before the sun found its way to the horizon, another eighty thousand and three of the enemy were dead.

* * *

11

The voice that was always close drew closer and quieter, gently insistent and full of pain, but never explaining what caused that hurt, the story continuing now without breaks. All that mattered were the human sounds and whatever those sounds meant. Which might or might not have been authentic. Translators were inevitably fallible tools. Even the best interpreter should be viewed with suspicion, and that was equally true for the tongue inside an old woman's mouth.

That's what Quee Lee cautioned herself.

Tongues were the oldest human translators.

Surus spoke, and she listened.

"Another two warm summers, and two more rain-drenched winters," he said. "We were ruling one peninsula of weathered hills and sheltered valleys. There was ample food for the shriveled army and the lone giant, plus a small population of natives who served as allies and slaves and distractions and spies for the enemy. But there were no water trees inside our little empire, and after it was shown and shown again that no relief was coming, we marched one last time, conquering the neighboring peninsula and one modest harbor already known to our merchants, and then every tree inside that new empire was cut to the ground and sliced into planks that were fitted together to create a respectable fleet."

A pause, and the convincing illusion of one thoughtful breath.

"My ship was finished last, and it was a marvel. Flat and broad, but not like a raft so much as a block of floating land. Curved in the front to ride the waves, and bristling with hooks and extra rope and a bed of woven reeds where I would ride on my back, feeding on the sun.

"Anibas was responsible for much of that design and all of the eagerness that went into its construction. His surviving officers did not approve. Given free voices, they would have argued for leaving me behind, or better, murdering me instead of risking my loss to the Mistral. But the bulk of our forces—those uncommon, infinitely skilled warriors of rank and file—adored me. As they should have. Each of them was alive because I was alive, and if I hadn't saved them every day, at least they could borrow strength from my presence and occasionally pretend that I was a brother god to the man who had led them here. Anibas, I mean. Who they worshipped to the end. And when you consider endless war and the profound hardship of every moment, then yes, there is no doubting the divinity of that man.

"My ship was ready to launch, and all of us would be leaving when the signs were strong. Which would be the next morning, provided there was sun and a favorable wind.

"More than a thousand nights like that one night had been spent together. A bonfire burned, giving light to his aging eyes and giving me the comfort of a small heat. Perhaps for the hundredth time, Anibas asked me to take charge of training the next generation of the Grand Many. My wisdom and cunning would produce a force like none ever sent into war before, and when the Mistral finally landed in our homeland, in

the shadow of the City's living wall, my army of gods would descend on them, and we would march back across the Mother Sea on a bridge made out of their corpses.

"That last detail was new, and it was a joke.

"Anibas had a capacity for grim humor.

"And then, assuming that tomorrow was our last day here and we were leaving this life for good, I reminded my close friend that his homeland was not my homeland. But I would fight for the Samoon nation, now and until I died.

"That brought a long look at me, and a laugh.

"Then for the first time, and the final time, Anibas made a promise. 'I won't give you your freedom when we win this war. Because you will have earned it for yourself, and my words would mean nothing. What I will give is my blessing, and I'll let you take all of the Grand Many with you. March south. Cross the deserts and discover whatever waits beyond. If your homeland is weak, claim it for yourself. If they are strong, beg for mercy and make a new life for yourself. But promise me this: When you have children, tell them about me. About us. Confess the great things that you have done, and most importantly, boast about the dishonors that you have avoided. Lie, if you must. But make them curious. Make them think about the people. Make those who haven't been born yet want to walk north into the cold, and my descendants will welcome them as brothers, and we will carry you around the Mother Sea on giant ships made of steel and fire.'"

* * *

Again, a pause.

And again, there was pain when the voice returned.

"The fleet was attacked," Surus reported. "Not as expected, not on the morning when we launched. And not on the next day or the next. But it was the fifth day, just past its center. Every rowing arm was tired and the wind had shifted directions, and the Mistral fleet was much larger than us and charging with every sail extended, bronze rams gouging hulls and clawed bridges dropping on the decks and the soldiers coming across, and there was nothing that the final Many could manage. Not on my own. A few rocks thrown by arms that were never intended to throw any distance, and then my lines were cut and I was adrift.

"I don't know where Anibas was killed. Perhaps in that battle, perhaps later in the war. Or if misfortune did its worst, he perished in some small manner. In bed as an old man, or at a feast given by strangers.

"Either way, the Mistrals had a wondrous prize in their gaze.

"The Great Surus.

"My tiny crew was killed with arrows, steel chains were lashed to the hull, and twenty ships began to pull me back to the city now known as Vengeance.

"This was no fate for me.

"Once again, I struck my sword against my loudest shield, and then I stood tall in the middle of my ship, expecting it to capsize immediately. But the platform was far too stable, and in the end, I had to walk two full strides to escape, pitching forward as I fell, wishing only that my wave would drown every boat and my enemies' coastline, the water rising as it roared to the ends of this world, crashing over those mountains that I had crossed so many ages ago."

* * *

The darkness of water brought pressure and a miserable chill, and then a separate darkness took hold, and no sense of temperature. Aeons were crossed. In an instant,

without effort. Then the war's final survivor was awake again, finding himself broken. Surus was mostly blind and entirely deaf. Even the idea of motion was beyond him. But he felt caring hands slicing him open, electric sweets forced into chambers crushed by thousands of meters of water and sediment and salt. Then his mind returned to a point where he was happily convinced that he remembered nothing, that he was a newborn, and what he was hearing had to be his mother's voice, because who else would bother speaking to tiny, useless him?

Surus tried to respond, but his capacity for speech must have been forgotten on the seafloor.

Sleep came, and dreams.

And eventually the sweets did their wondrous work.

Another day, and the baby found his voice hiding in one corner of that shattered, badly weakened body. And waiting beside his voice were his name and shards of his past, and finally, some muddled sense about where he was now.

No mother was speaking to him. Just strangers. Every one of his clumsy responses convinced them to talk on, but they offered nothing besides noise and emotion and more sustenance.

An entire year passed before Surus had the balance and desire to stand on his own legs.

Another year of work was necessary before he mastered this peculiar language well enough to understand what they were saying.

They wanted him to know that he was fortunate.

Like nothing else ever born, he was blessed.

That long fall was what saved him. The seafloor was three kilometers below the ship's keel, and being so much denser than water, Surus had gained a terrific momentum. Also, his feet must have been pointed down with the impact. Like a spearhead, he struck the abyssal plain, cutting deep. A thin layer of black sludge gave way to fossil salts, and because salt was greedy when it came to stealing water, his body was severely, perfectly dehydrated, leaving him in a state of profound hibernation.

That abyssal plain was gradually covered with river silts and volcanic ash and the skeletons of every creature that lived in the cloaking sea.

Then everything changed.

A woman told him that, and still uncertain about so much, Surus lifted a hand, begging her to quit speaking. Which she did, eventually. Yet she never stopped staring at the apparition before her. Surus wasn't the same species that she was, or that anyone was. A giant among lesser giants, he was a relic from days that no one recalled, besides him.

Looking at their surroundings, he guessed, "This is my seafloor."

"Yes," she said. "It once was, yes."

They were bathed in a fierce, delicious heat and surrounded by a jungle of vast black slabs and mirror-leaved foliage and black fans that followed the sun and countless thin towers that bent when the thick, thick air blew, that physical twisting generating currents that allowed them to grow half a kilometer tall.

"You stole the Mother Sea," he guessed.

Offended and amused, the woman offered complex words and difficult ideas—the kinds of knowledge that would take years and determination to master.

Her student interrupted again, warning her, "You're not talking to a fool. But pretend that you are."

With hands and simpler words, she explained how the lost sea once drained to the west, salted water running between mountains and over a cliff. The cliff fell into a vast basin. Lowlands, and that river never reached the bottom, since the atmosphere

was dense and fiercely hot, even more so than this good country was—

“Kik,” Surus said.

“What is ‘Kik’?”

That ancient name sounded too small when she said it.

“He was my brother,” Surus said. “He rode his raft down the tumbling river, and in the end, he must have gone over the edge and died along with the water.”

“Your brother sounds foolish,” she said.

Surus considered striking this woman.

He didn't.

Then with hands and more simple words, the woman explained how every river always cuts through rock, and over the aeons, his Mother Sea was partially drained. But when its surface was low enough and the heat grew that much stronger, the rest of the water had turned to clouds and blown away. All of that happened long ago, and the largest sea ever born on Where the Many Stand was dead.

Surus had never heard that particular name for the world.

“So you had a brother,” the woman said.

“More than one,” he said. “And sisters, too.”

Curious or polite, she asked, “What do you remember about them?”

“Everything,” he said.

She waited for more.

But this strange woman was an idiot in her own ways, which is why Surus said, “No. I don't like talking to you, and I never will again.”

* * *

Night wasn't finished, but its death was coming. Quee Lee spent the next silence watching that golden dome of light—the illusion of a city hiding over the horizon. Then she heard voices from the far side of the ridge. Her fellow travelers weren't coming for her yet, but they would. She needed to press her host for more.

“What happened next?” was a tiny question. Except that everything everywhere always happens next.

Her companion did his best to answer, finding moments and years worth recrossing with a few words.

“Fame,” he said. “As the sole living specimen of another age, a fossil wrestled out of the salt by fossil hunters, I was already known across the world. But the story of my life made me famous. Which was useful, I realized. And even better for me, some of my benefactors suspected that my history was false. That I was lying or confusing dreams for reality. That's why they decided to test my words. I was given the honor of a special car built for my gigantic body, and now I could ride the maglev roadways that crisscrossed that fertile basin and climbed up to the surrounding highlands where the Samoons and the Mistral once ruled.

“Yes, maglevs. One of the magical tricks that the Many had mastered while I was dead and unaware.”

“This was not my world, and that one drained sea was far from the greatest transformation. I found myself with attentive guides and well-wishers and a few rich souls who had nothing else in their lives. They took me to places where I might have stood before and where I could have walked before. The river where Kik died? A sterile gorge of ancient stone and wind. The beach where I came ashore? Lost to aeons of rain and tectonic shovels. From there, what might have been my army's route along the southern shore was followed backward. Every hill was familiar until I looked again, and then nothing was. Not even the bravest expert was certain which line on the ground would have been the shoreline that I remembered. The premier mountain of my day? The Top of the Wind had been eroded by the Samoon winds until it was one of twenty mounds of rubble, or it was somewhere else entirely. And what

about the city that owned me and cared for me, that I was loyal to forever? There was no trace of a cemetery or a harbor. Not one stone pathway resembled the wide avenues that I had walked. Five distinct circles marked where salt slabs had been cultivated, creating walls. But none of these were the walls that I had stood beside. I knew it and said so, and I could hear the doubts growing louder and shriller.

“Then we crossed the stolen sea again, exploring the Mistral’s lands. Except of course those people were forgotten, too. The peninsulas where we ruled had been buried by a sequence of volcanoes. Farmlands and rivers were killed by drought and thin forests of salt-saps. The city that we failed to conquer had lived on, but changing names many times. A different team of fossil hunters had cut into what resembled the most ugly mountain, uncovering more than fifty cities, each identified by its distinctive artifacts and styles of art and modes of death. And very deep inside that marvel, just beyond one shattered stone wall, they had recently uncovered an obelisk. Carved on that obelisk was a giant warrior facing a multitude of people. A lone Many wearing bronze and steel and wielding a fiery sword, and certain details in that glorious body and in the face resembled the still youngish fellow who had been lost for perhaps eight hundred thousand years.

“So now they believed me, at least a little more.

“With renewed appreciation, they accompanied the fossil to the end of his journey. To the mountains that had captured the minds of so many. Perhaps a thousand of the Many arrived at the final maglev station, and at least one hundred of those were able to make the planned climb. Was this close to my route? Or did I come from that direction? I was shown three likely passes. None were the Pass of Wailing Stones. But to stave off disappointment, I selected the final candidate and then turned in a new direction, letting a side canyon lead me to even higher places.

“Night was coming, and this new species of the Many didn’t approve of things that were difficult or dangerous.

“But I needed to see what was beyond the mountains. That decision was made, and with increasing honesty, I told them that I was tired of their presence and their fears, and, worst of all, their smallness.

“Robust tectonic reasons claimed that these mountains were likely taller than my mountains, and despite their amazing technologies, these Many never went beyond those peaks and saddles. Because, you see, even with the Mother Sea dead, even with the desert conquering so much, there were still cold wet northern lands and stubborn plateaus where watery kinds of people lived. Great nations and small ones were still thriving and fighting one another.

“As I had guessed, my toothless Many were incapable of war.

“Which was another reason they appeared pathetic to me.

“Three companions stayed at my side through the night. Together, we reached the Realm of Water, that line defined by fiberglass tusks rooted in the ground, forming a fence. The idea of a boundary.

“More than one species had achieved wonders, you see. The engineers who once commanded wind and steel had now mastered uranium and the radio, and I heard those people speaking to me. For the first time, I stood on that defining line, gazing north and west into a valley filled with golden light. And then, turning to my companions, I said, ‘Choose. Do we continue together, or not?’

“There were three of them, as I mentioned, and all were smaller than my little Waver. But as the Many always do, they fell into a tedious debate that would end with one shared decision and only one possible destination, and then they would turn together and walk home again.

“I didn’t wait for their foolishness.

“Striding on without them, I was temporarily alone, and utterly happy with my state. And I would love to tell you about my many subsequent adventures, Quee Lee.

Which are considerable and rather amazing. But the sun is here, your companions are restless, and your machine is eager to leave.”

* * *

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“Her machine” had been transformed. Those six ridiculous legs were replaced with two broad and well cushioned wheels, one wheel reaching far out in front while the other was directly beneath the back of a cabin. The cabin was remade, too, doubled in size and heavily air-conditioned, each seat designed for its specific passenger. Again, Quee Lee sat in back, but now with a wealth of space for legs and slightly more privacy. Freshly synthesized human and janusian foods waited inside chilled drawers, plus clean water laced with ice. The thorium reactor might not have been improved, but at least there was added shielding and its output wasn't wasted on heat and balky limbs. And the resident AI was much more decisive than before. As soon as its passengers were seated, the wonder machine attacked the slope, racing downhill, following its predecessor's footprints back to the established trail, and there it turned hard and gained even more speed, leaping over gorges and landing lightly on the far sides, the cold damp desert blurring and no one complaining, even as a joke.

Politely and then less politely, every human asked Quee Lee, “What did you do with your night?”

She always answered, but never repeated herself. Sleep and solitude and self-stimulation and contemplating a long happy life—those were her general responses, with a vagueness of detail that convinced everyone that she was lying.

But lying about what, and why?

It was the janusian husband who said, “You met our benefactor, I would imagine.”

Every human was staring, eagerly waiting for the “Yes” that they were expecting. That they deserved.

She answered with silence, and when others repeated the question with their own words, she would just sigh or shrug or do nothing at all. And when everyone grew bored or uncomfortable, they looked everywhere else, and the old woman closed her eyes and leaned back into that very comfortable seat, feigning sleep until genuine sleep took hold of her.

Quee Lee woke late that afternoon. Their swift new vehicle had just crossed the final ridge, and The City of Copper Salts was far below them, resting in a lovely bowl of blue-tinted ground. What looked like buildings were not. Ten thousand citizens were standing where they always stood, aligned to share a sun that was no more authentic than the desert or the stars. For the moment, one old lady was forgotten. The end was arriving, and there was a reliable touristy excitement, plus the thrill about defeating the delays.

“Days early,” a human shouted, “and aren't we the lucky souls?”

Then the janusian husband noticed who was awake. He used the name that he knew, then mentioned, “You aren't smiling in your usual fashion.”

“What does this new smile tell you?” she asked.

“I don't know how to answer that,” he admitted. “Apparently, I don't read human faces as well as I had imagined.”

Like everyone, she was thrilled that the trip was done. Suddenly she wanted to escape these strangers.

And then she surprised everyone, including herself.

“Quee Lee,” she offered.

The janusian wife turned her entire body, four eyes studying their companion.

“What is that?” her husband asked.

“My true name,” Quee Lee confessed.

Nexuses were still out of reach, but every passenger had spent millennia wandering the Great Ship, and by chance, two humans recalled a wealthy lady who wore that unusual name. And now it was easy to look past her disguise. This was the same rich lady, wasn't it? Whispers delivered revelations to everyone else, and what followed were full-volume stories about lavish parties and a certain notorious husband.

Oh yes, of course she was Quee Lee, and she had plainly lied to them, and being charitable by nature, they gave her every opportunity to apologize, or at least try and explain her silly reasons.

But no, the old lady just sat in the back of the cabin, smiling in her new fashion, which, like most polite nothings, was so very easy to maintain.

Those two busy wheels carried them down to a way station beside the City, and with one attendant waving them to the left, their craft turned to the right, parking where nobody wanted it to be.

A transparent blister was thrown over the vehicle, then flooded with warnings about hot surfaces as well as violent gales of cold, cold air.

Quee Lee spent those moments staring at the onyx giants and the waves of heat that never stopped rising from the pretty blue salts, and at the mobile blisters that were clustered inside the ten thousand shadows.

Watery visitors and watery residents weren't allowed to live anywhere else.

Once it was safe to leave, a doorway dissolved, and stairs were pushed up from the station's floor. The attendants waited below, angry about the rebuilt machine. Questions and threats were mixed together and thrown out at the innocent travelers, and no explanation seemed worthy. Last out of the cabin, Quee Lee was halfway down the stairs when she paused, searching for organisms that didn't exist here. She wanted to see tusks and four stout legs and golden fur and beaks capable of telling stories. But those people had never made it to the Great Ship, and uncertain why that was, she felt sorry and angry and unwilling to cooperate with anyone.

But then an attendant approached—a beautiful glory—and the alien asked her, “What happened to our vessel?”

“The Great Surus happened.”

Quee Lee said that. Nothing more.

And then the entire facility fell silent. Was it her imagination, or did every one of those towering giants just turn its head? These entities that never moved had moved, and she was wonderfully aware that they were watching her progress across the floor and how the attendants—glories and humans and harum scarums—approached the beautiful machine with caution and reverence.

Then the janusian couple was beside her, for the final time.

It was the wife who spoke.

“You were wrong, Quee Lee.”

“About what?”

“That you can never truly know another organism.”

Then an elegant hand touched her shoulder and her sweat, just for a moment, and with that, the alien and her captive husband vanished into a doorway that led into some other blister, and then to the worlds beyond.