

"South of the Siltian peninsula there is a stretch of sea where the winds do not blow and the currents die. In these becalmed waters, ancient ships with long dead crews drift endlessly, preserved in the salty airs. Some say that beyond these doldrums lie fantastic new continents, others say the end of the world, but they agree that this place is death for a mariner."

"I have heard tell of such a place."

"I have seen it."

Brekker looked across the table at the navigator, Allitolae. He was pompous, to be sure, but by all accounts his confidence was not undeserved. He looked every inch a Siltian seaman, with bright ribbons braided into his black oiled hair, a sash stitched heavily with family icons and commendations from Siltian nobles, and a narrow, blood red scabbard fastened across his back. Nevermind that most Siltian seamen no longer dressed that way.

Allitolae opened the pouch that Brekker had offered him and bit one of the coins thoughtfully. He unfastened a map case from his belt and pressed a vellum sheet proudly against the table. Brekker went to unlock a cabinet, and took his time examining the host of scroll cases that it contained. He selected one case and left the door open for Allitolae to ponder. He saw the navigator's eyes drift back to that cabinet every so often, and smiled inwardly. He went around the table and unrolled his map beside Allitolae's.

"You drew this yourself?" Brekker asked.

"Yes," Allitolae proclaimed, stroking his long mustaches, and asked, "From whom did you purchase yours?"

"I drew it," Brekker said, flatly.

Brekker's eyes moved rapidly back and forth between the two maps. Allitolae's was more extensive and more skillfully drawn. Still, his own map was the best he had seen up until that point, and the navigator seemed to be sizing him up anew.

"You are certain that these reefs end a mile off the coast?" Brekker asked.

"I have run that course myself."

Brekker dipped his quill and corrected his chart, before asking, "And this small island

here?"

"Uninhabited, but very beautiful. There is a volcano rising from the center of it and it is surrounded by the clearest waters you have ever seen."

Brekker added the island to his map, and filled in a portion of the Siltian coastline that he had previously left undrawn. Then he straightened and asked, "You have sailed to the Far East?"

"I have sailed there on four occasions. Last year, I made it there and back in two months."

"And you have contacts there?"

"I have dined at the tables of the Lord Fathers of three different Houses. I have drawn blades against the Mist Corsairs beside Eithe Shan, of the famed Shan Company, and he has called me his brother."

"How reliable are your charts of that area?"

"They are the best in your country or mine."

There was a quiet knock at the door, and Janieu entered with two cups and a long-spouted tea pot that had belonged to the niece of Tyrus the Undying. He filled their cups wordlessly and withdrew.

Brekker breathed deeply from his cup, and said, "I am satisfied. Are you certain there will be no trouble with your former employer?"

"I owe him nothing, and he fears Paya Gandro, who is strong in Port-of-All-Seas. I will offer him a chance to match your terms, but he cannot. There will be no trouble."

"Very well. I welcome you to my service. Tomorrow we will further discuss business. Tonight, my mistress and I would be pleased to have you dine with us in the city. Janieu will show you to your quarters."

The two men locked arms and kissed each other's cheeks, as they do on the Siltian peninsula, then clasped hands as they do in the Empire. Allitolae withdrew. If his reputation was deserved, the most talented mariner of his generation was now in Brekker's employ. Paya Gandro would be pleased. Brekker allowed himself a moment of self-satisfied

reflection. It had been a short seven years since he had borrowed a vast sum from Paya Gandro to begin his company. It had been five years since he had paid it back in full, with interest. Ten years ago, he had been guiding pitch-blackened rowboats with muffled oars into caves in the Southern Isles under the cover of darkness.

Janieu entered quietly.

"There is a man here to see you, Sir. He calls himself 'Red.'" Janieu seemed disdainful of the man.

"See him in. Bring Catyan."

Brekker returned his map to its case and held it idly behind him while he stared down at the table and waited for his next appointment. Years ago, he would have been raging, but he felt very little. Aging was not so bad as people made it out to be.

Janieu opened the door silently, and heavy footfalls came into the room. Brekker did not look up. He could smell the man from across the room.

"Endrev Brekker! It's an honor to be invited into your home. I have a new offer that I think will please you very much."

Brekker waited a long moment before he raised his head and turned slowly. When Brekker finally faced him, the man seemed slightly cowed, standing silently with an uncertain expression. Red was a large man, broad-shouldered, and thick fingered. He wore the same clothes that he had worn when last they spoke-- a month prior. He smelled of pipe tobacco, cheap liquor, and days without washing. His face was dirty, not unattractive, and reasonably intelligent for somebody who presented himself so poorly.

There was another knock and Catyan came into the room. He bowed slightly to Brekker and ignored Red. The wound on his neck was healing well, but would end in a lifelong scar. Slightly deeper, and Brekker would have lost his lieutenant in the assault on Lighthall's ships.

Brekker nodded to Catyan, and only then acknowledged his visitor.

"And what of your old offer?" Brekker asked softly.

Red shifted slightly, then laughed loudly and unconvincingly.

"I'm afraid that that proverbial ship has sailed." Red looked at Catyan from the corner of his eye. The Southerner stood impassive, slightly at attention.

"And the literal ship?" Berekker asked, studying the coloration of the ebony scroll case.

"That one... Uh... That one sailed, too."

"Under contract with Lighthall."

"Yes. It is not an easy thing to leave Lighthall's employ."

Berekker traded his scroll case for his neglected cup of tea and took his first sip before he responded.

"You had no reservations about leaving his employ when I gave you an advance on our contract."

Red fumbled at his belt, and Catyan's hand went to his sword, but the seaman had gone for a pouch.

"It is all here. I never spent it. I am an honorable man."

Berekker nodded at Catyan, and Red dropped the bag of coins into Catyan's waiting hand.

"It was business, you understand." Red smiled uncertainly at Berekker and then at Catyan.

"I understand." Berekker did not bother to look at the man. "You are one of the best navigators in the Empire. I contacted you because I considered you indispensable."

Red opened his mouth and shut it. There was new hope on his face.

Berekker said, "I understand you have an apprentice of similar talent."

"Aye, indeed." Red spoke quickly, eager to please Berekker. "He's young yet, with only a few voyages, but he knows numbers and winds as natural as anybody and he's good with the men. We call him Reed, on account of his being so tall and thin. Put me and him together and there's no better."

"And he is loyal to you?"

"Absolutely."

Berekker set his tea down and turned to face his guest for the first time.

"You are dismissed. One of my men will contact you. Janieu! Please see Red out. Catyan, stay."

Red was led out, slightly bewildered by the abrupt end to the conversation. When the door was closed, Berekker addressed his lieutenant.

"I want that man dead by nightfall. Have your man search his quarters for charts. As for the apprentice..." Berekker hesitated.

"He can never be loyal to you." Catyan said.

Berekker sighed and nodded. "Kill the apprentice as well."

"Yes, sir."

"Thank you, Catyan."

Berekker pondered his last appointment of the day. He sent Janieu for a particularly fine Siltian vintage and decanted it himself. He enjoyed his quarterly visits from the Assessor-- a clever and agreeable man of fine tastes and moderate means. His moderate means indicated that he was only moderately corrupt, and his fine tastes meant that he looked forward to his visits to Berekker's estate. They would walk through the entire estate, discussing the value of Berekker's possession, drinking fine wine and sharing tales of their travels. There was a game in this, but it was not adversarial, because they shared the objective.

The Assessor wanted to present the First Assessor with a highly valued inventory of Berekker's possessions, because his performance and bonus were judged on his ability to extract taxes. Most people tried to understate their wealth, but Berekker was one of a small handful who needed to overstate their wealth, and this made the Assessor's typically disagreeable job enjoyable for an afternoon. In the Empire, only the noble houses were entitled to keep men-at-arms. Commoners such as Berekker were allowed to employ a security force to protect their assets-- the size of which was directly related to the size of their assets. The additional taxes were not trivial, but the extra men were vital.

Berekker's relationship with this particular Assessor went back as far as his estate. Five

years ago, Berekker had commanded the attention of the merchant elite by purchasing nearly every pepper contract in the Southern Isles, and the Assessor had traded the harrowing life of a caravan captain for the security of civil service. They had spent most of the Assessor's first visit feeling one another out, unsure of their new positions. They had discovered, near the end of that first visit, that they were not in an adversarial position, and they had thoroughly enjoyed one another's company ever since. Berekker was looking forward to showing off a collection of a dozen small warrior gods in hardened clay from the Steppelands, where the Assessor had spent a harrowing year with his caravan.

Janieu knocked, and Berekker called for them to enter, without looking. Janieu showed the Assessor in and withdrew, and it was only then that Berekker turned and saw a stranger standing near the door-- a stranger in the blue-trimmed tunic of an Assessor, with an ugly smile and a malicious gleam in his eye. Berekker had no doubt that this new Assessor was in the pay of Lighthall.